


# Prologue



# RED TAILS IN THE SUNSET:

## AN INTRODUCTORY YARN ABOUT THE YABBY

"Yabbies?" said Bev one evening. "Ooh, I used to catch yabbies all the time when . . ."

"When you were a kid," I said.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Everybody caught yabbies when they were kids," I said, "or at least claim they did."

Bev's revelation had just won me five bucks, the amount I bet Bill the Dill that the first person I mentioned yabbies to would reminisce about catching them as a child. Bev came in right on cue. "Do you know anything about yabbies, Bev?" I'd asked, and I knew I'd won the bet there and then because she assumed the glazed misty look I understood so well. Instant yabby nostalgia. Memories of bygone childhood days filled with sun and mud and yabbies and fun and bare feet.

"Anyway," Bev continued, "we used to pinch a bit of mum's black cotton, not that she'd miss it mind you, and get a bit of old meat and, for a net, well if mum wasn't using it we'd take the . . ."

"You'd take the kitchen strainer," I said. "Didn't ever use the old method of punching some holes in a kero tin, baiting it, and throwing it in did you?"

"No. Used to always use the meat and string and, if mum wasn't using it, the . . ."

"The kitchen strainer. Ever catch

'em with your bare hands?"

"Bloody oath," interrupted Bill the Dill. "Used to flick 'em up out of the water. Caught 'em that way all the time, it's the only way. Better 'n a bloody net. Then there were the times we'd dangle our feet in the water and . . ."

"And wait for the yabbies to nip your toes. Yes, I know the story. Didn't ever cut your feet with a broken beer bottle so the blood would attract more yabbies did you?"

"Not me personally, no," said Bill. "But I did hear of a few blokes who went to catch yabbies one Christmas Day and Des, that was his name, well he did, cut his foot and put it in the water when he was . . ."

"Drunk. Yes, I know the story."

"Tell ya one ya don't know," said Bill slyly. "I did hear of one bloke who got so shickered he stripped off his clothes, sat on a log over a dam and dangled his . . ."

"Male exaggeration. An old story. Heard some Tasmanian bikies, Satan's Riders, saying they caught giant Tasmanian crayfish by dangling their . . ."

"Monsters, that's what those Tassie crays are," said Bill. "Biggest bloody yabby in Australia aren't they?"

"The biggest freshwater crayfish in the world. In fact, Australia's got the world's three largest crayfish, plus the smallest."

"Oh yes, used to love yabbies," said

Bev, still far away in her memories. "Used to really love them."

"Not me," said Pauline, who'd been quietly listening to us. "I think they're horrid." She shuddered. "Horrible dirty things. Used to scare me. Used to remind me of ..."

"Of a spider," I said.

"No. More like a centipede," she replied.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Some people do have an unnatural fear of the yabby. Almost phobic in some instances. Can't say I blame them though. The yabby does look like an alien creature oozing out of the primeval muck, if you know what I mean."

"Reminds me of when we first came out from England," said British Bob. "My wife saw a yabby and nearly died of fright. When you've never seen one before you don't know what you're looking at when you first see it, you know."

"They're related to centipedes," said Bill.

"What? Ex-Pommies?"

"No. Yabbies. They evolved from the centipede."

"Rubbish," I said. "They've got nothing to do with centipedes. They're crustaceans, although the Swedish scientist, Linnaeus, mistakenly classified the crayfish as an insect. He also gave marijuana its scientific name — that might explain the yabby-insect error. Funny thing about yabbies, while everybody knows of them, very few people know anything about them."

"But they're just pests, aren't they?" said Pauline. "That's what farmers told me when I was living in the bush. Said if they could get rid of every yabby in the country that would do them."

"That," said Bill, "is because they burrow into the walls of a ..."

"Dam," I said. "I know the story. They are bad in that respect, although Europeans value the crayfish in their waterways. They say it keeps water clear of weeds, detritus and pests. They call it the 'health inspector'. Come to think of it, I've heard Australians call crayfish 'river garbos'."

"I heard the French reckon the yabby is a gourmet food," said British Bob.

"Not only the French. The Swedes,

most Europeans and some Americans. Some Australians have realised it too, you know. It's being farmed now and most of the big names in the cookery business have recognised the yabby's gourmet quality."

"Gourmet quality?" said Bill. "Tell that to the blokes where I come from and they'd laugh in your face."

"True," I said. "But a lot of people like eating yabbies. And bushmen do have a sort of deep-seated begrudging admiration for the yabby. It's a tough little bugger, one of Australia's great survivors. A real 'little battler' — it can handle the worst conditions the bush can bowl up."

"It's not only a bush creature," said Bill. "I've seen kids catching it in the middle of the ..."

"City. I know the story. All part of the yabby's ubiquitous nature. Further proof of the survivor it is — it thrives in the middle of a polluted city, or a half-dried outback waterhole. It can even live for long periods when there's no water."

"Blood oath," said Bill. "They can burrow in mud and walk overland. Now that you mention it, yabbies are mostly ignored."

"Too true. They don't get much recognition. They don't feature in our folklore or our literature. I think the 'mystery' about it is another endearing aspect of the yabby. Australians do have this odd sort of affection for it and regard it as uniquely Australian. I think it's tied up with the fact that we're supposedly a nation of infracanthophiliacs ..."

"Guess who got a new dictionary for Christmas," said Bill.

"Glad you asked. It means we're a nation which champions the underdog. That's definitely the yabby. Little understood, often underrated and culturally ignored. What better creature to be regarded as an underdog than this lowly and humble, but hardy and pugnacious underwater undermud little Aussie crawler."

"Well, I don't know about yabbies," said Pauline, "but you seem to know a lot about them."

"All there is to know," I said, and that's when the kid selling the evening paper flooded me. He'd been listening to me for a couple of minutes. Then he asked:

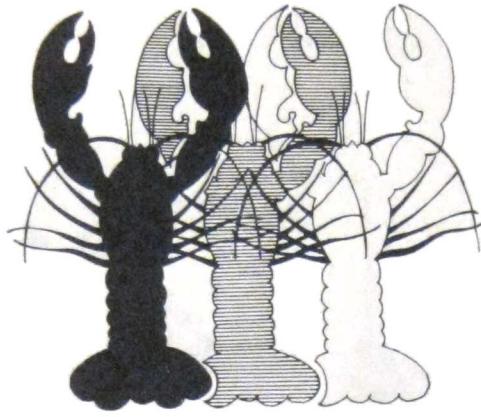
"Hey, why does a yabby's tail turn red when you cook it?"

Academ.



PART 1

# The Yabby Facts



## A YABBY IS A YABBY IS A ...?

What is a yabby? You could say it's a: "Multicellular animal provided with an alimentary canal, and with a chitinous cuticular exoskeleton, with a ganglionated central nervous system traversed by the oesophagus, possessing a heart and bronchial respiratory organs," and few people would know what you're talking about, probably including yourself.

You could say the yabby is a decapod crustacean, that is, a crustacean with ten legs, and you'd be closer to the truth. You would also be close to an argument with an avid amateur yabby observer who would promptly point out that the yabby has only eight legs and one pair of claws. For the purpose of scientific classification the yabby's claws are regarded as legs, or rather, specially developed modified legs terminating in chelae, or claws. Therefore, eight legs plus two claws (or legs with claws attached) equals ten legs equals a decapod crustacean, presuming of course that there is no argument about a yabby being a crustacean, which it definitely is.

However, other creatures besides yabbies belong to the decapod crustacean grouping, so the definition needs honing. If you called a yabby a freshwater crayfish you would be correct. Well, almost. If, for

example, you come from the Queensland coastal region you wouldn't call a freshwater crayfish a yabby at all. You'd refer to it as something else, possibly a lobby. Queenslanders call a shrimp-like creature a yabby, but Queenslanders like to be different.

If you call a yabby a freshwater crayfish you encounter a further problem in that you have to ascertain which particular freshwater crayfish you are talking about. Considering the fact that more than a hundred species of freshwater crayfish have been identified in Australia alone, it becomes obvious that such a loose definition of a yabby could be fraught with error. You must specify which species of Australian freshwater crayfish is most commonly referred to as a yabby. To do this you need a basic understanding of all the freshwater crayfish species, and you need to be aware of the various colloquial terms, dialect words and nicknames used to refer to different crayfish.

Yabbies ultimately belong to a tribe of crustaceans called Astacidea, and this tribe is comprised of three families, one of which is also called Astacidae, another Parastacidae, and the third Nephropsidae. The Nephropsidae family doesn't concern yabby fanciers at all. This is the family of marine or true lobsters which, incidentally,

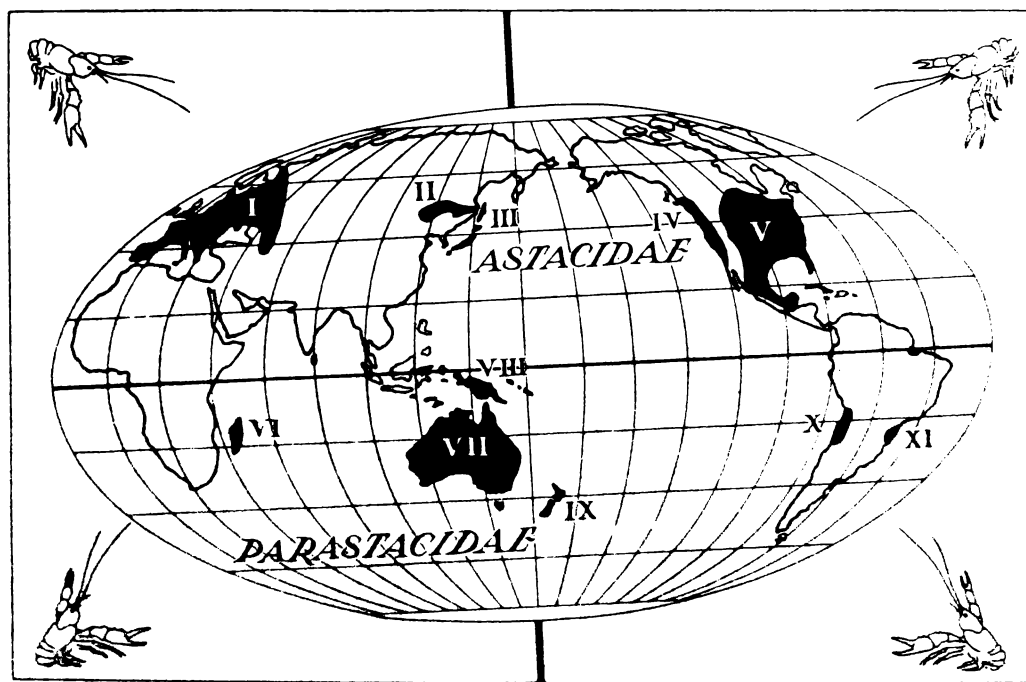
are not related to Australian marine lobsters — these belong to a totally different crustacean tribe. Both the Astacidae and Parastacidae families are comprised solely of freshwater crayfish; crayfish from the Astacidae family live in the northern hemisphere, Parastacidae crayfish live in the southern hemisphere. Obviously the yabby belongs to the latter family.

To the casual observer, northern and southern hemisphere crayfish are similar. However, scientists observe minute but fundamental differences between the two families which suggest they evolved from different sea-dwelling ancestors. It is presumed that freshwater crayfish evolved from some nephropoidean ancestor during the Mesozoic era, between 130 to 225 million years ago, the period during which the dinosaur appeared and disappeared.

Fossils recording the crayfish's evolution are extremely rare. A very doubtful fossil found in Irish limestone deposits dated back to the Carboniferous

age of three hundred million years ago, when the first reptiles appeared. Less doubtful, but imperfect, fossils found in Germany dated back to the 130-million-year-old Cretaceous age, when the dinosaurs disappeared and flora with modern aspects emerged. Undoubted freshwater crayfish remains found in Idaho, U.S.A., dated back to the late Tertiary age, when whales, apes, grazing forms, and large carnivores emerged. No southern hemisphere fossils have been recorded before the Pleistocene age, when early man emerged, just over two million years ago.

The world-wide distribution of freshwater crayfish is idiosyncratic — their distribution is discontinuous in both hemispheres. The tropics, with the exception of Papua New Guinea, are devoid of freshwater crayfish from about latitudes 10°N to 10°S. Africa has no indigenous freshwater crayfish, yet one species exists in Madagascar. Crayfish are also inexplicably absent throughout most of the Asian



World-wide distribution of freshwater crayfish: I. Eurasia; II. Amurland (Manchuria, Russia); III. Japan; IV. Western North America; V. Eastern North America; VI. Madagascar; VII. Australia; VIII. New Guinea; IX. New Zealand; X & XI. South America.

continent and the greater part of South America. However some areas, for example Kenya, have been stocked with imported crayfish, a trend which is proving ecologically detrimental.

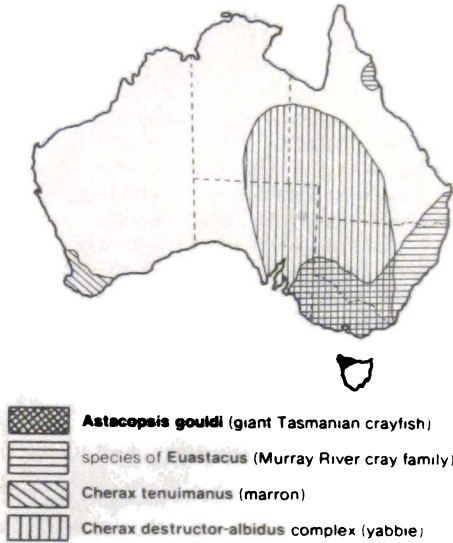
There are almost four hundred species of freshwater crayfish in the world, but North America and Australia have by far the largest and most diversified range of species. According to H.J. Hobbs, of the Smithsonian Institute, the following number of species occur:

<b>Northern hemisphere</b>	
Europe .....	7
North America .....	257
Eastern Asia: Korea, Japan, Amur Basin .....	4
<b>Southern hemisphere</b>	
Australia (includes Papua New Guinea, Aru Islands and Misool because genera overlap) .....	109
Madagascar .....	1
New Zealand .....	2
South America: Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, South Brazil .....	8
Total number of species identified: 388	

Australian freshwater crayfish range in size from the largest in the world to the smallest. Australian crayfish are classified into ten major groups, or genera, viz: **Astacopsis**, **Cherax**, **Engaeus**, **Engaewa**, **Euastacoides**, **Euastacus**, **Geocharax**, **Gramastacus**, **Parastacoides**, and **Tenuibranchiurus** — this last, monotypal in species, is the smallest crayfish in the world, measuring 2 cm (3/4 in). Generally speaking, it's more convenient to categorise the genera into three broad groups:

- Aquatic:**  
Occurring only in permanent waters — rivers, streams and sometimes lakes.
- Semi-aquatic:**  
Living in burrows connected to water by access shafts, and capable of surviving out of water for long periods.
- Terrestrial:**  
Living anywhere on land providing there is water within 2 m (6 ft) of the ground surface.

I've selected the dominant species from each of these three groups so that the real culprit, the yabby, can be run to earth and readily indentified.



Distribution of Australia's major freshwater crayfish groups.

## Aquatic Crayfish

Visually and size-wise, this is the most spectacular group of Australian freshwater crayfish. The major genus is **Euastacus**, and there are twenty-seven species of these predominantly river crays spread throughout the cooler areas of south-eastern South Australia, Victoria and southern and coastal New South Wales. They also occur in the mountain streams of northern New South Wales and southern Queensland, with one isolated species occurring in the mountain streams of northern Queensland.

The river crayfish is rarely confused with the yabby, but magazines and newspapers do cause taxonomical trauma because they inevitably illustrate yabby articles with the more photogenic crays. Aquatic crays can be most readily distinguished by their large spiny claws, spiny bodies, and sometimes rows of large spikes neatly aligned on their tails. They are also literally the most colourful crayfish, exhibiting a magnificent array of hues.

One species particularly common in the Sydney region is often referred to as the 'Sydney Crayfish', but sometimes it is called a yabby.

One cray found only in the Lamington Park-Tambourine Mountain region of southern Queensland. **E. sulcatus**, known colloquially as the 'Lamington Spiny Cray', looks like it's been painted by a football barracker. Bands of brilliant blue alternate with white. Scarlet stripes flash on its joints. This cray often surprises bushwalkers because it can be found wandering the damp forest floor far from water. When threatened, it rears, waves its powerful claws, and hisses loudly.

Another colourful cray was featured on Harry Butler's **In the Wild** TV series, although Harry called the cray a yabby. Tut, tut. The creature was a Gippsland cray and wonderfully coloured — maroon body with red semi-translucent legs and flashes of dazzling electric-blue on the tips of its claws, around its eyes, and along the edges of its tail.

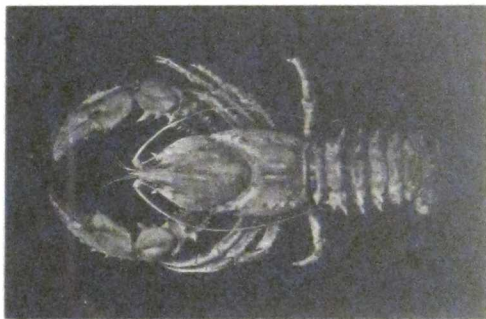
The leader of the aquatic crayfish pack is undoubtedly the Murray Cray (**E. armatus**), often dubbed the 'Mighty Murray Cray', and meritoriously so. This is the largest of the spiny crays, and the second largest freshwater crayfish in the world. It is officially catalogued as 45 cm (18 in) long, measured from head to tail and therefore not including the claws (this, incidentally, is the correct way to measure any cray), and weighing 2.7 kg (6 lb). Fishermen claim, as they usually do, that they have seen larger specimens. Murray Crays can be found in the Murray River and many of its feeder streams and rivers.

Visually the Murray Cray has an awesome prehistoric appearance. The neat rows of dog-teeth spikes dotting its tail resemble studs on a Hell's Angel jacket, or a gladiator's arm-guard. This cray is usually brown with tinges of green, and has white spikes and claws, but beautiful delicate-green crays can be found in the deeper reaches of the Murray River. Murray Crays look so striking that they were once featured as a popular aquarium sideshow attraction at the Royal Melbourne Show. 'See Grotesque Freshwater Lobsters' beckoned a sign, and according to the sideshow operator the crays quickly proved to be the

stars of his show.

I provided a home for the crays after their stint at the show, and now keep them in a large glass tank. Their physical power is quite impressive. Their claws can crush the hard plastic boxes used to filter their water, and they neatly snip in half the thick plastic tubing of their aeration system. I've placed house-bricks in front of the filters for protection but the crays simply push these aside and occasionally bulldoze the bricks to the opposite end of the tank.

The Murray Cray also hisses when out of water and in danger. Its shell doesn't feel real; it feels rather like perspex or fibreglass. Fishermen who catch and eat the crays, which are a delectable food, use a tomahawk to break the cooked cray's shell.



The Murray Cray, *Euastacus armatus*.

Another aquatic crayfish genus, **Astacopsis**, is found only in Tasmania but one species, **A. gouldi**, is internationally famous. It's by far the largest crayfish in the world. Naturalist Crosbie Morrison reported an **A. gouldi** measuring 76 cm (2 ft 6 in) from claws to tail — add antennae and you've got more than a metre of cray! **A. gouldi** species weighing 4.5 kg (10 lb) have been officially recorded, although unofficially fishermen have claimed 6.3 kg (14 lb) catches. Tasmania's Inland Fisheries Commission says 3 kg (7 lb) is a common size.

While I was researching this book, several people told me that a north-western Tasmanian hotel displayed a photograph, taken in the 1930s, of a man holding an **A. gouldi** with its claws held at shoulder height.



This crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldi*) was caught in the Flowerdale River near Wynyard and weighed in at more than 3.6 kilograms.

The cray's tail touched the ground. I tracked down the hotel, only to find it had been converted to residential use. The occupants remembered the photograph, but had thrown it away along with other 'junk'. Tasmanians call this crayfish a freshwater 'lobster', and Lobster Creek, near Ulverstone, was named after the lobster-like creatures which inhabit its waters.

Unlike the Murray Cray, which prefers deep swift-flowing water, the Tasmanian crays live in the smallest of streams. In 1909 the English naturalist Geoffrey Smith reported:

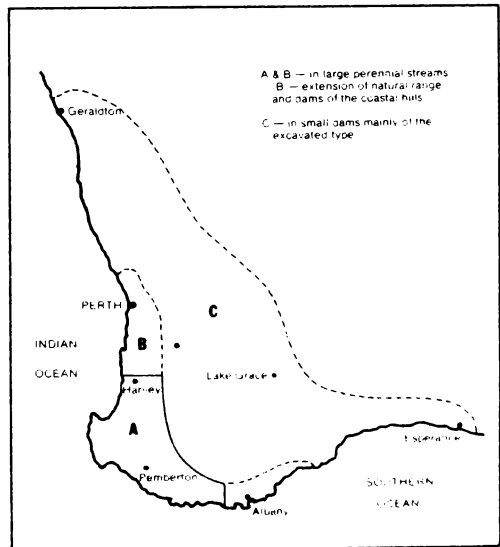
*"We obtained the largest specimens from Muddy Creek, a small rivulet that one could easily step across and it seemed extraordinary to fish these huge monsters out of little pools in which one would expect to find nothing larger than a minnow."*

Although the species was originally described by C. Gould in 1870, very little is known about *Astacopsis* today. In 1968 a crayfish reserve was established at Caroline Creek, in Tasmania, to study the cray's habits.

**A. Gouldi** is an ugly crustacean. Its colour varies from blackish-green to chocolate brown. It has a relatively small tail and a bulbous, bullet-shaped, hydrocephalic head. Its claws are as large as a man's hand and have blunted tubercles, or spikes. It looks like a monstrous mutant yabby; indeed it could well be cast on film as the gargantuan radioactive horror-cray which survived the holocaust. Adding to its odious appearance are swarms of parasites which live on the cray's body — sluggish, slimy creatures almost the same colour as their host and resembling flattened tadpoles.

## Semi-aquatic Crayfish

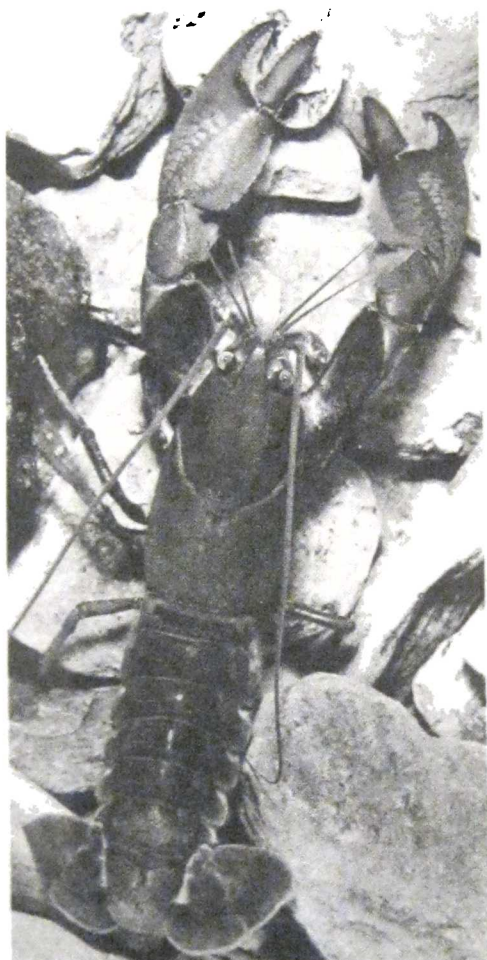
Most Australian crayfish are semi-aquatic. The dominant genus is the **Cherax**, and the most prolific **Cherax** species is the common crayfish, known scientifically as **Cherax destructor**, and popularly known as the yabby.



Distribution of *Cherax tenuimanus*, or marron, in Western Australia.

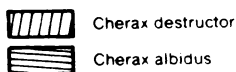
The yabby's territory covers approximately one third of Australia, taking in most of Victoria, New South Wales (except the





The yabby most common to inland streams, dams and irrigation ditches is the smooth freshwater crayfish, or ***Cherax destructor***.

Sydney and central coastal region), Queensland, South Australia, and the Northern Territory. Obviously, its distribution range straddles several climatic regions. The yabby is an extremely hardy species and can survive in the perpetual swamplands of coastal regions, or outback watersheds which are dry for some part of the year. The yabby can live in burrows out of water, migrate overland, and is less susceptible to changes in water conditions than are the aquatic crays. This is particularly so with



Distribution of ***Cherax destructor*** and ***Cherax albidus*** in Australia.

water salinity. The Murray Cray, for example, is intolerant of increased salinity and has consequently disappeared from the lower reaches of the Murray River in South Australia. Researcher Dr Jack Frost claims that yabbies can live in seawater for at least forty-eight hours, and can live satisfactorily in a seventy-five per cent seawater solution. He says it would therefore appear that in a strict sense the term 'freshwater crayfish' might be misleading.

The yabby reaches a maximum length of about 16 cm (6 in) and weighs 150 g (5 oz). Yabby catchers almost invariably compare their record-length catches to the size of a beer bottle. "As big as a beer bottle" is the common yardstick.

Superficially, the yabby looks quite ordinary as far as crayfish go. It's smooth-shelled and lacks the interesting studs and spikes which adorn most aquatic crayfish. Its colour is usually a drab dun-olive, although it can modify its colour to blend with its background. A yabby's colour can range from black, through to green, an ochreish-yellow, brown, or red. Brilliant blue yabbies do occur, although apparently these are freaks — fishermen often report catching one blue yabby in a batch of hundreds of olive-coloured yabbies. Some

yabbies in the Darling River region of New South Wales are commonly a less brilliant blue. Yabbies reared in aquariums or laboratories will develop a semi-translucent powder-puff-blue hue. In 1925 Herbert Hale wrote in *The Australian Museum Magazine*:

*"The colouration of the adult yabbee varies very considerably; some examples recently received alive from Broken Hill are of a remarkable pale pink shade, others are almost black. The soil in this locality presents a good range of colour, and a resident . . . writes that the colour of the yabbies is always similar to that of the situation in which they are taken. Thus, in Stephens Creek they are dark blue, in the Tramway Dam delicate pink, in the Imperial Dam pale brown, and in the Redan dams reddish-yellow. A backwash of the Imperial Dam is full of black, decaying vegetable matter, and here black specimens are found."*

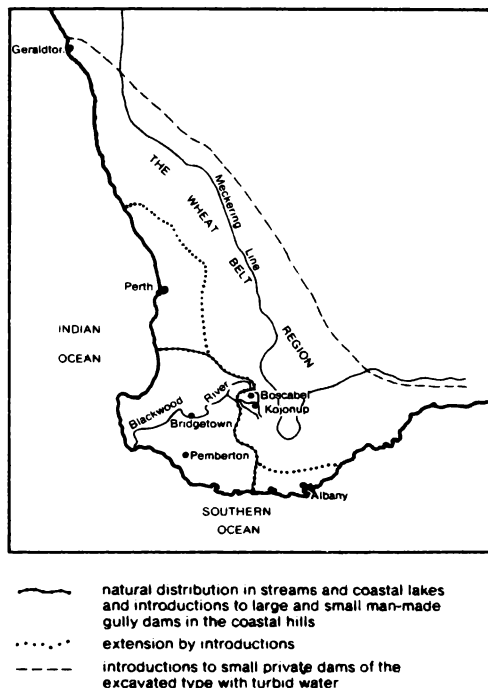
One species of *Cherax* found only in a small area of western Victoria and South Australia, *C. albidus*, is called a 'White Yabby' because of its grey-white colour.

Observing a yabby in its environment is difficult — it's a shy elusive creature. Most people usually glimpse only a hint of antenna or claw, or a vague impression of the body before, pffft, the yabby flicks its tail and disappears, leaving behind only a little agitated swirl of muddied water. The yabby's appearance can be better appreciated when observed in an aquarium. It is streamlined, almost elegant in its sleekness. The porcelain-like armour-plated body looks somewhat futuristic, a refugee from a Jules Verne novel, a stripped-down space-age *Nautilus*. Its movement is a poetry of motion: a mass of intricate components moving independently, yet all part of a complex synchronised whole: antennae swishing, legs stilting forward, swimmerets busily waving like weeds in worried water, claws rearing tentatively like a karate fighter, mouth parts grinding and spewing out a fine trail of discarded filtered food particles.

There are no yabbies in Western Australia although two *Cherax* species, *C. quinquemaculatus* and *C. preissii*, are similar to the yabby. These are locally known as 'gilgies' and 'koonacs' respectively. Most Western Australians presume easterners are talking about gilgies or koonacs when they

refer to yabbies, or vice versa.

One species of Western Australian *Cherax* which is never confused with a yabby is the highly renowned *C. tenuimanus*, commonly known as marron. This is the third largest freshwater crayfish in the world. At a quick glance it looks like a very large yabby, although to the experienced eye its claws are smaller and slimmer in relation to its body, and its body has a different shape. The marron has more keels, or ridges, on the back of its head, and its back and tail are often dotted with blister-



Locality map and inland boundaries of the distribution of marron in Western Australia.

like protuberances. It's much darker in colour than the yabby — mature marron are black, juveniles range from yellowish-green to brown, and bright blue specimens occasionally occur.

The marron has the largest tail, in relation to its body, of all freshwater crayfish. The tail constitutes 41 per cent of the marron's total body weight. This, together with its large overall size — up to



40 cm (15 in) long and weighing 1.8 kg (4 lb) — makes it the superior table crayfish. Its flesh is internationally renowned as the sweetest and finest crayfish meat available. The marron is often referred to as the queen of crayfish, and marron fishing is so popular in Western Australia that a bag limit was introduced in 1952 to protect the species. Farmers are experimenting with commercial marron cultivation. In 1970 Americans attempted to introduce the marron into Louisiana, but it failed to adapt to American conditions.

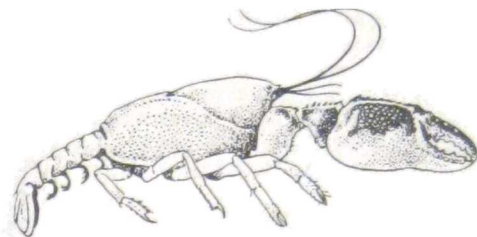
The marron's distribution range is limited, and it occurs naturally only in rivers and streams of the Jarrah forest area of south-west Western Australia. It can be successfully introduced into man-made lakes and dams, and this has increased its distribution range considerably. Unlike the yabby, the marron does not burrow and therefore cannot survive in semi-permanent water sources.

## Terrestrial Crayfish

The terrestrial crayfish are the low end of the crayfish spectrum — unfortunate niggardly little creatures, useless as food and sport, although they do provide excellent trout bait. Various species can be found in Tasmania and Western Australia, and the *Engaeus* genus is particularly prolific in certain parts of Victoria, notably Gippsland.

Terrestrial crayfish have virtually no tail. They have a thick head and dominant burrowing claws. Their colour varies — pale orange, pale green, salmon pink, and yellow. One species is quite pretty — a bright orange body shading to blue at the extremities.

Earlier this century these small crayfish were known as crabs or land crabs, but they are now commonly referred to as yabbies. They burrow into paddocks and hills, leaving the ground pitted with holes. Each colony has several holes which converge into one central underground chamber. They are notorious pests, causing serious damage in orchards when they burrow under the trees, exposing the roots. They also damage lawns and undermine



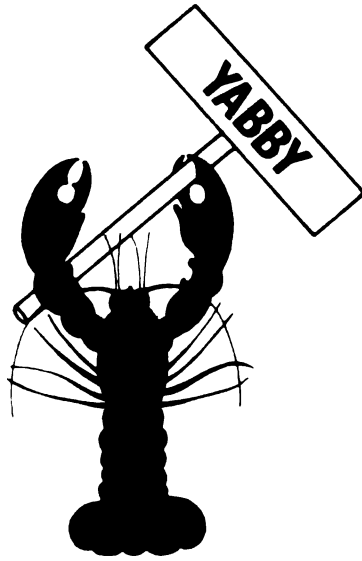
The *Engaeus* or land crayfish is common to south-eastern Australia and Tasmania.

house foundations. Tractors often get bogged in the chambers, and the holes are hazards for horses. In 1848 a letter written by a Mrs Perry and published in Canon Goodman's **Church in Victoria during Episcopate of Bishop Perry**, described Gippsland as:

*"Full of crab holes, which are exceedingly dangerous for the horses. There are holes varying in depth from 1 ft to 3 ft [30 to 90 cm] and the smallest of them wide enough to admit the foot of a horse: nothing more likely than that a horse should break its leg in one."*

In 1925 Melbourne's **Punch** reported:

*"In parts of Victoria, where the earth is well watered, land crabs are so numerous that the turrets of their underground dwellings dot the paddocks in hundreds. In Gippsland one may see these 'crab cities' . . . Some parts of South Gippsland are so thickly pitted with crab holes that the ground is dangerous to ride over, and horses bred in the localities show the same fear of such places as those do in other parts when they come to a rabbit warren . . . The hole it makes is small, ringed on top with the clay it digs out when burrowing, but rain widens the excavation 'til there is only a mere surface shell hiding a dangerous pit trap that brings down a horse or any other animal that steps on it."*



## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In the case of the yabby, chaos and confusion. Misuse of terms, varying regional dialects, revised scientific nomenclature, ignorance, and mistaken identity add up to etymological mayhem. Seeking refuge in a dictionary or encyclopedia is often useless; definitions are inadequate, wrong, or out of date. Lesser known Australian terms for crayfish are simply ignored. For example, the **Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary** (1976) cites only 'yabby' and gives its scientific name as **Parachaeraps bicarinatus**, a term that's been obsolete for almost two decades. Another dictionary defines 'crab-hole' as a hole made by an **Astacopsis**, which is, of course, the Tasmanian crayfish.

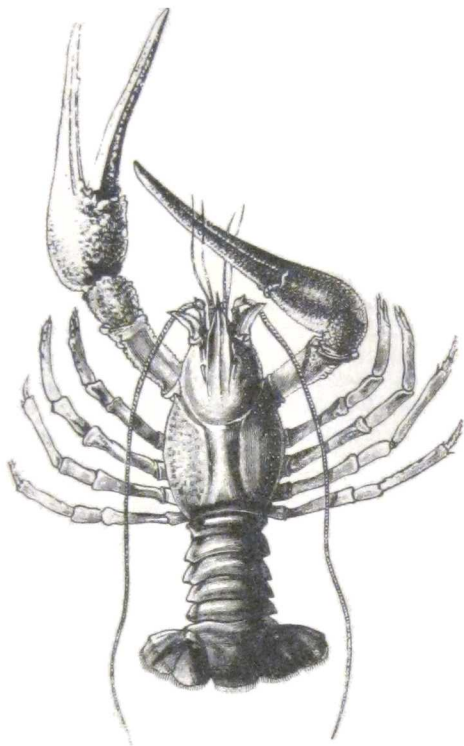
The etymological problem is not a recent one. Use of the word 'crayfish' has been argued about for a century. In 1880 the English zoologist Professor T.H. Huxley wrote:

*"The origin of the common name 'crayfish', involves some curious questions of etymology, and indeed, of history. It might be readily supposed that the word 'cray' had a meaning of its own, and qualified the substantive 'fish' — as 'jelly' and 'cod' in 'jellyfish' and 'codfish'. But this certainly is not the case. The old English method of writing the word was 'crevis' or 'crevice', and the 'cray' is simply a phonetic spelling of the syllable 'cre' in which the*

*'e' was formerly pronounced as all the world, except ourselves, now pronounce that vowel. While 'fish' is the 'vis' insensibly modified to suit our knowledge of the thing as an aquatic animal.*

*"Now 'crevis' is clearly one of two things. Either it is a modification of the French name 'écrevisse', or of the Low Dutch name 'crevik', by which the crayfish is known in these languages. The former derivation is that usually given, and, if it be correct, we must refer 'crayfish' to the same category as 'mutton', 'beef' and 'pork', all of which are French equivalents introduced by the Normans, for the 'sheep's flesh', 'ox flesh' and 'swine's flesh' of their English subjects. In this case we would not have called a crayfish, a crayfish, except for the Norman conquest. On the other hand, if 'crevik' is the source of our word, it may have come to us straight from the Angle and Saxon contingent of our mixed ancestry."*

To further confound the issue, the name for the European freshwater crayfish is 'astacus', derived from the Greek 'astakos' which means lobster. **Astacus**, which Australian freshwater crayfish were first classified as, was originally used in Europe to describe both the marine and freshwater crayfishes. In the early nineteenth century a French naturalist, M. Milne Edwards, pointed out that the two forms of crustacean were entirely separate beings and needed



The Russian yabby or *Astacus leptodactylus*, about  $\frac{1}{3}$  natural size.

separate names. He solved the problem by granting the freshwater crayfish exclusive use of the Greek-derived scientific name for lobster, and renaming the lobster *Homarus*, a word he formed by Latinising the old French word for lobster: *Omar*. An idiosyncratic solution, but it certainly made life simpler for European crustacean classifiers — from then on, if it was called crayfish, it was freshwater; if called lobster, it was marine.

If only the situation was so simple in Australia! Crayfish and lobster are both applied to the marine crayfish which in fact shouldn't be called a lobster at all. Healy and Yaldwyn, in their book *Australian Crustaceans In Colour*, say:

*"The terms 'lobster' and 'crayfish' are used haphazardly in Australia for the large, edible, marine, macrurous crustaceans. The question as to which of the two names is more appropriate is often a source of doubt and*

*argument. There are in fact no lobsters fished commercially in the Southern hemisphere. The large commercial crustaceans fished in Australian waters belong to an entirely different group of decapods from the North Atlantic lobsters . . . They do not possess the lobster's characteristic large and powerful grasping claws."*

The Australian animals should be referred to as 'marine crayfish' to avoid confusion with the equally well known 'freshwater crayfish'. Australians rarely define which crayfish they are talking about and this makes historical records and references particularly confusing. Tasmanians, however, always refer to their marine crayfish as 'crayfish', but call their large freshwater crayfish 'lobsters', resulting in some interesting muddles with mainlanders. Tasmanians take their definition very seriously. Mr James Hope of Devonport claims the term 'yabby' is a foreign word in Tasmania, for while they have a crustacean like the Australian mainland yabbies, the Tasmanians call it a lobster. Mr Hope adds that some people who live in Tasmania and are ignorant of Tasmanian terms may talk about 'yabbies' or even 'crayfish' but these are 'un-Tasmanian terms', and the product of people "who cannot distinguish between things Tasmanian and things Australian"

The word 'yabby' is derived from an Aboriginal term. Edward E. Morris, in *Austral English: A Dictionary of Australasian Words, Phrases and Usages*, gives the word the following history:

*"Yabby, n. properly Yappée, aboriginal name for a small cray-fish found in water-holes in many parts of Australia. The Rev. F.A. Hagenauer gives Yappy, in 'Curr's Australian Race,' . . . as a Gippsland word. Such variants as the following occur — Yappitch, kapich, yabbechi, yaabity. The distinction between the thin and thick consonants is usually uncertain."*

Curr noted that variations of the word 'yappy' were used by Aborigines in other Victorian districts.

For example:

yaapitch — Kerang  
yampit — Gunbower  
yaparte — Mt Emu  
yapi — Swan Hill

yapit — Matte Yallock  
 yapitch — Lake Boga  
 yappi — 80 km (50 miles) south of Swan Hill  
 yappitch — Hamilton, Lake Wallace

Some people spell the word, yabby; others, yabbie. There seems to be no hard and fast rule. In this book I have used yabby for the singular, yabbies for the plural.

Generally, 'yabby' is used to describe *Cherax destructor*, and the land crayfish genus, *Engaeus*. It's sometimes applied loosely to aquatic crayfish, sometimes to describe Western Australian crayfish other than marron, and often used as an umbrella word for all Australian freshwater crayfish. For example, in 1943 Elizabeth Pope, writing in the Sept. 30 edition of *The Australian Museum Magazine* and describing a display in the Sydney Museum, explained:

"Two kinds of yabbie, or freshwater crayfish, are also displayed: the giant, black Tasmanian crayfish (*Astacopsis Franklinii*) and the most typical yabbie from the mainland (*Euastacus Serratus*)."

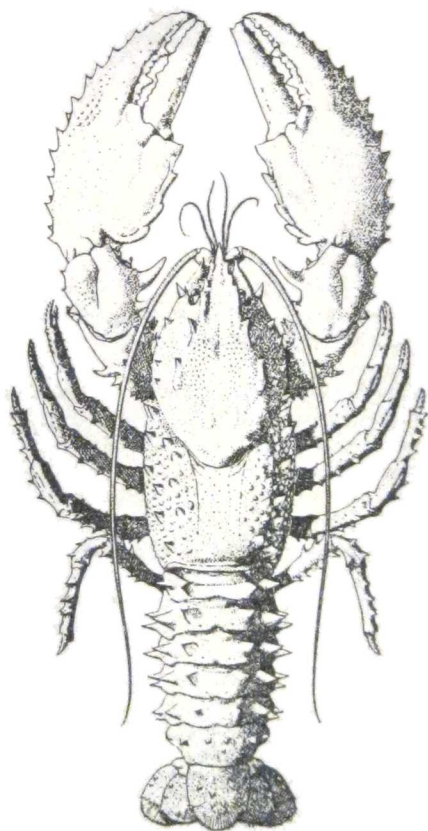
But the *Euastacus 'Serratus'* Pope referred to was not really the most "typical yabbie from the mainland".

There is a suprisingly large range of localised names used to describe the common yabby:

Chelgi — Northern Territory  
 Clawchee — Queensland  
 Cradie — central Queensland  
 Crawbob — western New South Wales  
 Crawchee — western New South Wales  
 Crawchie — Queensland  
 Crawdad — New South Wales  
 Crawfish — western New South Wales  
 Crawler — South Australia  
 Crawley-fish — New South Wales  
 Crawlie — South Australia  
 Craybobs — south-western New South Wales, New England  
 Craydads — New South Wales  
 Crayfish, land crayfish — throughout Australia but particularly western Queensland  
 Hairy land yabby, land yabby — Victoria, refers to various *Engaeus* species  
 Lobbie, lobby — very common in coastal Queensland where 'yabby' is used exclusively to refer to a type of saltwater shrimp. In Victoria this shrimp-like creature is often called a Bass yabby

Poor man's cray, poor man's prawn — Victoria, South Australia  
 River garbo — Victoria, New South Wales  
 White yabby — Victoria, refers to a local grey-white coloured variant of the yabby  
 Yabbee, yabber — outmoded South Australian terms  
 Yobbie, yobbis — Adelaide

Most of the words which are formed around **claw**, **craw**, or **cray** represent the patois that has arisen in the various Australian regions where 'crayfish', or 'crawfish', was the most commonly used term. In the regions where yabby has been used almost exclusively, the word rarely varies beyond



The Murray Cray is noted for its excellence on the dinner table and is reported to grow to a weight of almost three kilograms.

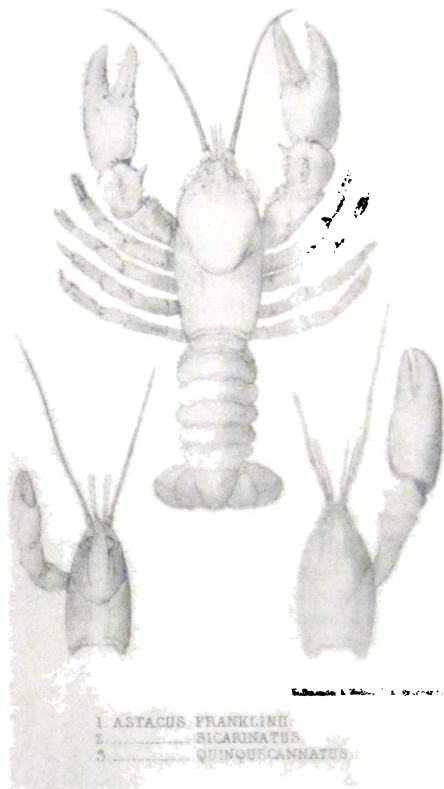
the two differing endings 'y' or 'ie', with the exception of yobbis and yobbies which I believe developed from mispronunciation by the local Slavic community. Unfortunately there seems to be no record of, or research into, these terms.

Contrast this situation with other countries where regional dialects have been meticulously recorded. For example, in France the most most commonly used word for crayfish is 'écrevisse', yet naturalist Marc André listed the following variations and dialect terms:

Alpes — piau dau diable  
 Alsace — krabs (from the German — Krebs)  
 Bourgogne — cancre, craibosse, creuviche, creuisse, ecrebisse  
 Bretagne — géorenn, guéorenn, kinid  
 Champagne — crevice  
 Comté de Nice — grita  
 Dauphine — chambré, chambro  
 Flandre — gravasse, grevesse  
 Franche-Comte — graibeusse, graibusse, grebosse  
 Hainaut — graviche  
 Jura — caimbre, grabusse, grebasse  
 Languedoc — chambré, djambré, escarabissa, escrabisso, jambré  
 Limousin — eicorobisso, engravisso, escrabido, escrabisso, escorobisso, escrabicho  
 Lorraine — cravousse, graouisse, gravesse, gravisse, gravousse  
 Morvan — equeurvisse, greuche  
 Pays Basque — chamarra  
 Pays Romand — chamberrot, Tsamberrot  
 Poitou — ecrebisse  
 Provence — chambre, chambri, chanvri, cranc, gambre  
 Tarentaise — ecrivisset  
 Vosges — etgrévisse, grawetz, grébeusse

I virtually stumbled across the Australian terms, hearing of them mostly by word of mouth. Bushies have a fine grasp of the differences in terminology. Mr Alex Priest, of Gunnedah, New South Wales, says that in his neck of the woods, any fisherman using the word 'yabby' is slotted immediately as a coastal bloke. If they are called 'craybobs' he most certainly comes from the New England area. But if he calls them 'crawchies', you have a dinki-di north-westerner.

Apart from the variations of 'yabby' already listed, there are hundreds of different Aboriginal names for this creature.



Eyre's drawing of crayfish found during his expeditions into Central Australia in 1840-41.

Some of them are:

Enkodko, eukodko, koongala, ukodko — According to Dr J.E. Gray in Edward John Eyre's *Journals of Discovery into Central Australia and Overland from Adelaide to King Georges Sound in the Years 1840-41*, these terms were used by the natives of the Murray River alluvial flats in South Australia.

Konkro — Mrs James Smith, a nineteenth-century missionary teacher, wrote that natives of the Booandik tribe (which then spread from western Victoria to eastern South Australia) used this term.

Curr, in his *Australian Race*, lists well over two hundred Aboriginal words for

'crayfish' and 'lobster'. To collect these words, Curr sent letters to early pastoralists, church ministers, and others, asking them to fill in a phonetic spelling for the Aboriginal equivalents on a list of English words. It is assumed that, in the responses to Curr's list, 'lobster' most often refers to the larger aquatic crayfish and marron, while 'crayfish' mostly means the smaller yabby and related species. For 'crayfish', Curr compiled a list which includes these words:

Acheroo, andar, ander, aurugut  
 Baranjak, barranjerk, barrinjook, baupit,  
 begool, birrooa, bogally, boagalli,  
 bodardi, boogal, boogali, boogalli,  
 boogarli, bookillee, boorkoom, bor-pa,  
 bouragin, bowgili, buggilla  
 Carrda, cheewagga, chielghi, choorn-gu,  
 cunder  
 Didbee, dirnduk, dirndung  
 Ede, einga, elin, ella, elparra  
 Galoom, geary, gidda, gilga, gindangia,  
 goombarroo, goonack, goonak,  
 greeur, gurinein  
 Illai, inga, ingar, inka, inundah  
 Jilgy, jin-ju, junju  
 Kakine, kandra, kapich, karee, kary,  
 keerie, keery, kidneykooderi, koarow,  
 komdar, kongola, konkro, koonak,  
 koondagi, koongideri, koongoola,  
 koongoolo, koon-gooloo,  
 koonkooderie, koonkoodirri,  
 kottingeri, kumbooloo, kuniekundi,  
 kutera  
 Langunia, lip-lip-kill, lip-lip-till, lippekil  
 Maraija, maren, marthera, meauki,  
 mintoola, moak, monagur, moolan,  
 moorogonong, mooroonong, mouwa,  
 mucheecan, munya, muracuru,  
 murangir, murragolong, murrami,  
 myngul  
 Naloro, narraminyeh, nenewn, newn-newn,  
 ngaltaitye, ngobbera, nguchul,  
 ninge-ninge, ninyouen, nube, nubena  
 Omothoo, oovarroo  
 Perran, pevin, piccool, picquol, pungari  
 Quarroo  
 Ringwong  
 Tararukau, tchoriong, thinta, thoombur,  
 thornabun, thumal, tinungi, tooiyung,  
 toomban, trunagi  
 Ukot, umpurra, undang-karang, unde  
 Waat, wanger, wegiga, wiija, wolona,  
 wolonuk, worronguna, wunmeen  
 Yaapitch, yabbechi, yampit, yaparte, yapi,  
 yapit, yapitch, yappi, yappitch, yappy,  
 yingar, yingo, youri, yukalto

John Mathew, in his *Eaglehawk and*

*Crow: A Study of the Australian*

*Aborigines*, lists these native words for 'crayfish':

#### Victoria:

Avoca River — yapitch  
 Broken River — yinangi  
 Ercildoune — yaabitch  
 Gippsland — dendong  
 Gunbower — nark  
 Lal Lal — bambam  
 Yarra River — talakborong

#### New South Wales and south Queensland:

Barwidgee, Upper Murray —  
 tongambalanga  
 Mary River — illai  
 Warrego River — mamaru  
 Upper Murray, Woorajery tribe — naingan

#### West and west-Central Australia:

Toodyay — gonak

#### Southern South Australia and east-Central Australia:

Darling — koon-gooloo  
 Diyeri — kuniekundi  
 Murunuda — mulpo  
 Mythergoudy — beekodl  
 Narrinyeri — meauki

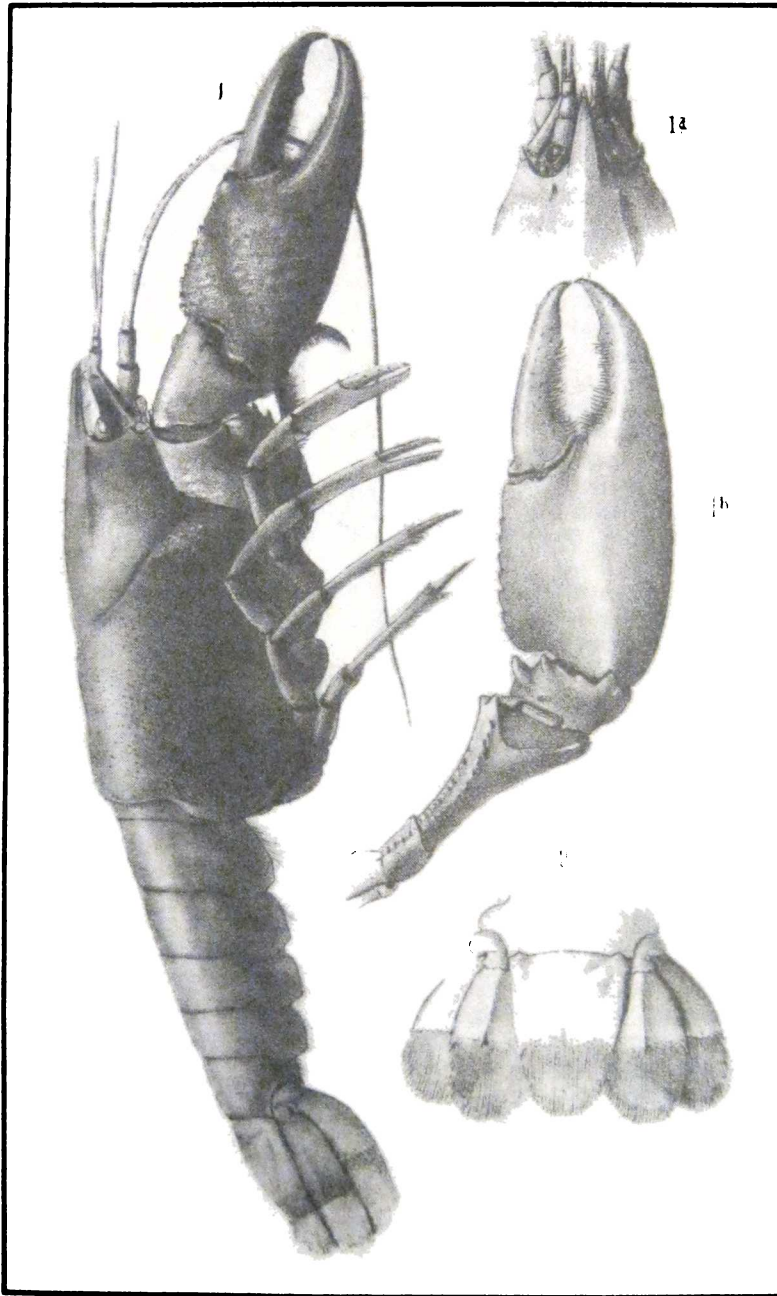
#### North and Central Australia:

Bloomfield Valley — warkoju  
 Macdonnell Ranges — ityanma  
 Palmer River — omothoo

Aquatic crayfish are usually called river, spiny or thorny crays, crayfish or lobsters, and some crays are simply described by their locality — Murray Cray, Sydney Cray. Some of the Aboriginal words for these crustaceans which Curr lists are:

Atta  
 Boligar borpa, boogurrie, bookill,  
 boongangooloom, boonggangooloom,  
 burnicum  
 Chiboli, chipel  
 Danbee, danibutchka, dirnduk, dirndung,  
 dookami  
 Eel, elli  
 Gannoon, ganon, gidyar, gonon,  
 goonaway, goowarra, gunnak  
 Inka, inkka  
 Karee, karkoorra, kary, keera, keler, kipil,  
 koongooya, koory, krangalang,  
 kunggurla, kurnkuderrri, kurukudirri  
 Ma-a, mamaroo, mangaba, marin, marine,  
 marooroo, marra, marran, marrida,  
 mokin, mooban, mooragonong,  
 motoga, motogar, mudi, murrin,  
 murry  
 Naloan, nolaka, notkun, nuele  
 Pirrinoo  
 Quarra





This superb illustration was one of a series published in 1878 in Professor McCoy's authoritative work on the zoology of Victoria. The illustrations were originally printed in colour and proved to be extremely accurate representations of their subjects.

Reri-reri, ruja  
 Tayatea, tayateh, thamoga, thandoola,  
 thangamboola, thugamong, thupul,  
 toing  
 Waat, wagooramoo, walloon, wambein,  
 weechong, winga, wirra, wolkoo  
 Yandurrer, yaram, yegari, yeekerra, yinga

Gilgie is commonly used in Western Australia to describe *C. quinquecarinatus*, a crayfish similar to the yabby. Variations of the word are goolgies, jilgies, joolgies, julegies. Gilgie is an Aboriginal word; variations include dil, jalgai, jilgee, tjilki. Koonac is also a Western Australian word used to describe *C. presseii*, another crayfish similar to the yabby. Variations include coonac/k, goonac/k, koonack. The word is Aboriginal and other forms of it include gonack, gunnock, goonok, goonuck, konack. Marron is another Western Australian word describing the large *C. tenuimanus*. Dr Noel Morrissy, a researcher with the West Australian Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and a specialist in marron studies, suggested in 1976 that the origin of this word was:

"... most probably from the French word, *marron*, for a type of chestnut with a hard, spiny, dark shell enclosing white flesh regarded as a food delicacy, the analogy with the crayfish being apparent."

Dr Morrissy later revised his opinion, stating:

"Although the common names of other freshwater crayfish have long been known to be of aboriginal derivation, the origin of 'marron' has been much more obscure, possibly reflecting their much more isolated native distribution in the days of early settlement. All, but one recently discovered, of the authoritative works on aboriginal languages failed to provide an association except for the similarity of 'marron' to various spellings of the aboriginal word for food or bread."

The definitive association is located in Curr (1886). For 'lobster', spellings of marin, marine, marran and murrin were obtained from the districts of Blackwood, Bunbury, Uduc (Harvey), King Georges Sound (Albany). For 'crayfish', marren (Lower Blackwood) and perran (Blackwood) were obtained. Local fishermen sometimes refer to the marron as 'black spider'.

## International Names for the Yabby

In the U.S.A. the most common term for the freshwater crayfish is 'crawfish'. American writers have commented:

"Crayfish to the intelligentsia, and crawfish to the rank and file."

"You can call 'em crawfish. Or you can call 'em crayfish and sound out of place in Louisiana."

Edward E. Morris, in his **Austral English**, says:

"The name **Craw-fish** is merely an ancient variant of **cray-fish**, though it is said by Gasc, in his French Dictionary, that the term was invented by London fishmongers to distinguish the small **Spiny Lobster** ... from the common **Lobster**."

Americans claim the word as their own. George Henry Penn, an associate professor of zoology, wrote:

"Of all the local and popular names by which they are called throughout the nation, two are generally accepted and there have been heated arguments as to which is the correct one: **crawfish** or **crayfish**. According to the dictionary either is correct, the one used being purely a matter of personal preference. Even among professional zoologists both have been used indiscriminately. Personally I prefer **crawfish** since it is completely American having been first used in 1817 by Thomas Say, the first American zoologist to study crawfish."

Penn shows his bias when he goes on to incorrectly claim:

"Its counterpart, **crayfish**, was coined by an English scientist, Thomas Huxley, about fifty years after Thomas Say's **crawfish** had been put into use."

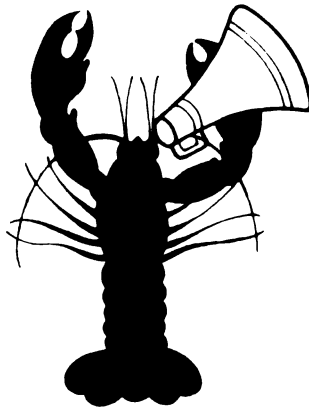
(Of course, Professor Huxley did not coin the term 'crayfish'; rather he explored its roots, as quoted earlier in this chapter.)

Americans also call a crawfish: crab, crawcrab, crawdad, creekcrab, dixie lobster, grasscrab, mudbug, stonecrab. Those terms are mostly used in the southern states. In Oregon the words mini-lobster and short lobster are used, while elsewhere papershell crabs, peelers and soft craws are used to describe a species with a very thin shell.



**Terms used in other countries are:**

**Germany — Edelkrebs (noble crayfish),  
Flusskrebs, Krebs**  
**France — écrevisse**  
**Italy — cammaro, gambaro, gommarello**  
**New Zealand — crayfish, and the Maori  
term — Koura**  
**Sweden — kräftor**  
**England — crayfish, river crayfish**  
**Papua New Guinea — bopa, dede, joeri,  
moerido, obawo, oedi, pomo, tako,  
talía, toro**  
**Finland — krebse**  
**Norway — kraft**  
**Poland — raki**  
**Yugoslavia — rak**



## CRAYFISH SLANG AND OTHER EXAMPLES OF YABBY AS SHE IS SPOKE

"To do a crawfish" is an American expression, meaning moving or crawling backwards — to back out with the devious movements of a crawfish. Usually the phrase is used derogatorily, implying reneging, or backing out in a cowardly manner. "I'd hate to be in your shoes Lafe, when Frank hears you crawfished," is how **Range Riders Western Magazine** used the word.

Americans call worthless wet lowlands 'crawfishy' land. There is no Australian equivalent but S.J. Baker's **Australian Language** claims that land pocked with terrestrial crayfish ('crab') holes was often called 'debil debil' or 'devil devil' land. Some Americans call Nebraskans 'bug eaters', after mud-bug, and Marylanders 'craw-thumpers'.

Russians describe their typical sex act as the 'crayfish position'.

In Australia, the author K.S. Pritchard used 'crayfish' in the sense of acting the coward or low schemer in **Haxby's Circus**, published in 1930. "To do a gilgie" is used in Western Australia, and it too means withdrawing or backing out.

Yabby is sometimes used in Australia as a nickname, usually for gangly or awkward youths. Mr Darcy O'Shea told me: "I was born at Barmera on the River Murray and as you would well know many

yabbies are caught there. I have been told that as a child I had an odd flaying method of crawling and that someone once said I look like a yabby. The nickname stuck. Even now I have some uncles who call me yabby or yabb."

In Queensland a musician was nicknamed 'Lobby' Lloyd because of his gangly stature. The experience proved so moving he later wrote a hit song entitled "Krome Plated Yabby".

Anne Hill of Naracoorte, South Australia, was also nicknamed 'yabby'. She recorded her feelings on the matter in verse:

## A BUSH YARN

*Quambone's the home of the yabby  
out New South West  
The Merri Merri Creek can boast of the  
best . . .*

*I was nicknamed Yabby and rightly so  
Tickled and teased from head to toe  
From just a babe in the cradle to this  
day  
Folk roun' Quambone know me as  
Yubby, Yabby, or Ya.*

*Despite attempts at keeping it shoosh  
Somehow someone knew from the  
bush  
I've denied it, who do ya mean'd it,  
damned it and yet  
The name isn't one you can ever  
forget.*

*My father, a yabby gourmet at heart  
Christened me Yabby right from the  
start*

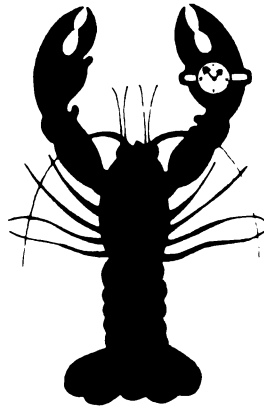
*With slight variation, up to this day  
I've been called Yubby, Yabby or Ya.*

*Folk query the name, their hearing  
worse still*

*Not sure . . . but maybe . . . it couldn't  
be . . . and will*

*Delight in the bush yarn of the bush  
baby*

*Who was named Yubby, Yabby or Ya.*



## WHAT MAKES A YABBY TICK?

Like humans, its heart. The yabby has a highly developed circulatory system. Its clear-coloured blood passes from its heart via arteries into minute blood vessels, then gathers in cavities and flows back to the heart via gills, where gaseous exchange takes place — that is, it breathes. The yabby has two gill chambers. It can clamp the cover of these chambers shut and trap moisture, which allows it to live out of water for some time. If the water's oxygen content is too low, the yabby will surface and expose its gills to the moist air above the water.

The **Adelaide Advertiser** once ran a headline which announced:

### **The yabby has unpredictable guts**

but that's sensationalism for you. The yabby has only one gut which, as far as I can determine, is fairly predictable unless, I suppose, the yabby is suffering gastric problems. The yabby's long gut passes from its stomach to its tail. The relatively large stomach consists of two parts: a mill chamber lined with hardened ridges for crushing food, and a filter chamber with bristles for straining food. Digestive glands are situated near mid-gut. A pair of green glands act as excretory organs.

H. Carlisle, in his 1880 treatise on the philosophy of freshwater crayfish, wrote:

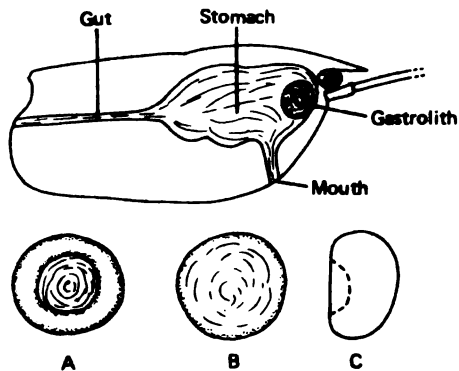
*"Not only does the crayfish have a brain,*

*but he behaves himself in a very abnormal manner when his brain is removed; he becomes in fact deranged."*

I personally can't vouch for that. All I know is that the yabby has a simple brain and nervous system, and is very sensible. It possesses several sensory receptors: compound eyes; touch receptors in its antennae, walking legs, and body; chemical receptors in its antennules, and on the walls of the gill chambers. The yabby detects odours through its antennae.

A yabby is a muscle-bound brute. With the exception of the intestine, its tail is all muscle. That's why the yabby moves so fast when it flicks its tail. Its claws are all muscle too. That's why it nips so hard. We call the muscle 'meat' and eat it.

The yabby has an external skeleton (exoskeleton) which keeps its insides in and its enemies out. But while the skeleton, or skin, affords protection, it discourages expansion. To grow, the yabby must shed its old skin — moulting, as the layman refers to it, or 'ecdysis' as the process is known scientifically. What happens is this: before the yabby moults calcium is withdrawn from the old skin and stored in small white coral-like 'stones' — the gastroliths. A new soft folded skin forms beneath the old skin. The old skin splits, the yabby steps out, and for a



Position of gastroliths in the stomach of the yabby and (A) rear view, (B) front view, and (C) side view of gastrolith.

short period grows within its new pliable and stretchable skin. The yabby draws calcium from its gastroliths, the surrounding water, and from eating its old skin, and the new skin hardens. The yabby can only grow in staggered stages each time it moults, which occurs frequently in young yabbies, less frequently in older yabbies.

During moulting, lost limbs can be replaced. Before moulting, a 'bud' appears where the missing limb was formerly situated, and this bud grows with each successive moult until finally a new instant ready-to-use limb appears. The yabby can replace its antennae, antennules, legs and claws, but not its eyes. According to a South Australian zoologist, the yabby replaces a lost eye with an extra batch of antennules. Why, nobody knows. The replacement of limbs is a rather crafty set-up, an anatomical advantage the yabby exploits to the fullest. Its limbs taper at the point where they join the body and, if a leg or claw is grabbed by an enemy, the yabby can simply break away. The limb's taper makes for easy breaking, and it helps blood to coagulate. If, for example, a claw was cut in half at its widest point, the yabby would bleed to death. Instead, it simply plucks away the rest of the claw and the wound promptly heals.

Moulting is a fascinating process to watch. Reaumur, a French naturalist, filed a report in 1712:

*"A few hours before the process . . .*

*begins, the crayfish rubs its legs against each other and, without changing its place, throws itself on its back, bends its tail, and then stretches it out again, at the same time vibrating its antennae. By these movements, it gives the various parts a little play in their loosened sheaths. The crayfish appears to become distended, probably because it has begun to retract the limbs into the skin of the body. If at this period the extremity of one of the great claws is broken off, it will be found empty, the contained soft parts being retracted as far as the second joint. The soft part of the skin, which connects the end of the carapace with the beginning of the abdomen, gives way, and the body, with the new skin, protrudes.*

*"The crayfish rests for a while, then the agitation of the limbs and body recommences. The carapace is forced upwards and forwards by the protrusion of the body, and remains attached only near the mouth. The head is next drawn backwards, while the eyes and its other appendages are extracted from their old investment. Next the legs are pulled out, either one at a time, or those of one or both sides together. Sometimes a limb gives way and is left behind in its sheath. The operation is facilitated by the splitting of the old skin down one side of the limb. When the legs are disengaged, the animal draws its head and limbs completely out of their former covering; and, with a sudden spring forward, while it extends its abdomen, it extracts the latter, and leaves its old skin behind. The abandoned skin is so like the crayfish itself that, except for the brighter colour of the latter, the two cannot be distinguished."*

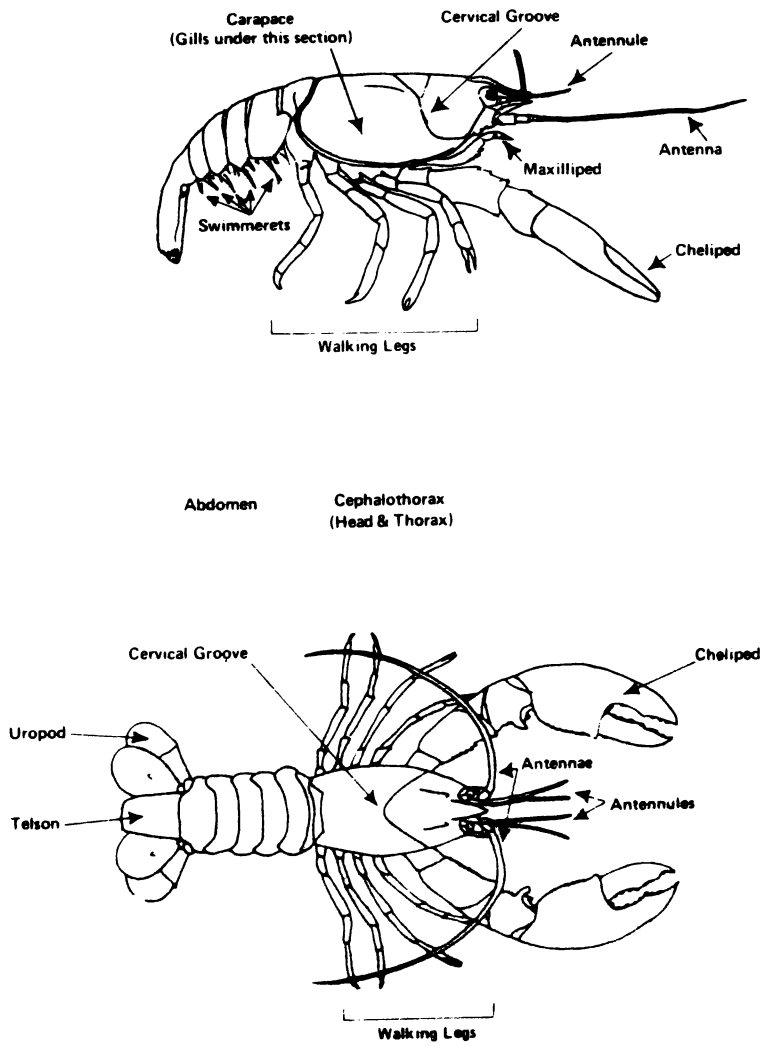
Moulting can take from a few minutes to several hours and, once well underway, the process cannot be stopped. After moulting the yabby's soft skin renders it vulnerable and it tends to hide until it toughens. A nineteenth-century naturalist observed:

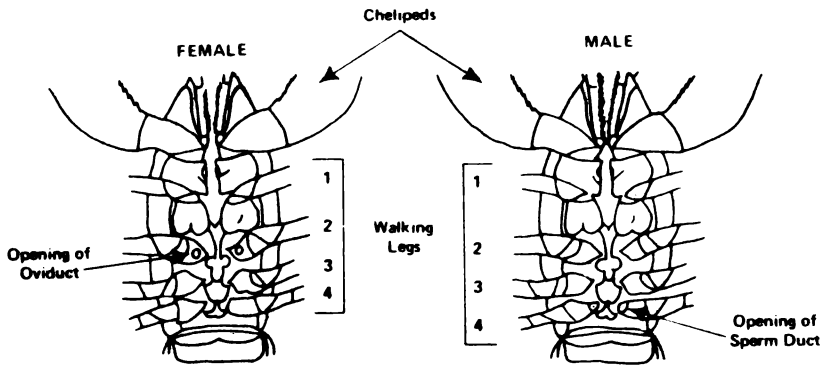
*"I once had a domestic freshwater crayfish, . . . which I kept in a glass pan, in water, not more than 1½ in [4 cm] deep, previous experiment having shown that in deeper water, probably from want of sufficient aeration, this animal would not live long. By degrees my prisoner became very bold, and when I held my fingers at the edge of the vessel, he assailed them with promptness and energy. About a year after I had him, I perceived, as I thought, a second crayfish with him. On examination, I found it to be his old coat, which he had left in a*

most perfect state. My friend had now lost his heroism and fluttered about in the greatest agitation . . . Every time I entered the room during the next two days, he exhibited the wildest terror. On the third, he appeared to regain confidence, and ventured to use his nippers, though with some timidity, and he was not yet

quite so hard as he had been. In about a week, however, he became bolder than ever; his weapons were sharper, and he appeared stronger, and a nip from him was no joke."

Externally, the yabby's features are as shown in this diagram:





Underside of yabby showing reproductive openings.

The claws are used in self-defence and to gather food. The first two pairs of walking legs end in miniature claws, the second two pairs in hooks. Both the miniature claws and the hooks are used to gather food, and to grasp live food, such as worms. The paddle-like swimmerets are waved to and fro, aerating the yabby and allowing it to swim forwards. The tail assists what is in fact a primitive form of jet propulsion. This flexible tail can close quickly, creating a jet of water which shoots the yabby backwards at high speed.

Sexually, yabbies come well equipped. The male has a pair of penes, the female two genital openings, or oviducts. The mating position is like that of humans. The female lies, or is thrown, on her back and the male mounts her, spraying sperm in a hit-or-miss manner around the female's genitals. The female then passes up to eight hundred eggs through the sperm, fertilising them. The eggs are pushed down to her swimmerets where they stick firmly. The tail then becomes a 'hatchery', doubled over the eggs to protect them, and when the swimmerets are waved, the eggs are aerated. The eggs hatch approximately forty days later and the young yabbies are almost facsimiles of the adult, unlike the planktonic larval form of the young of most other edible crustaceans, for example, lobster krill.

The young yabby doesn't leave the egg; rather it grows from it. In a yabby's first

stage of life it has a swollen head because its head has retained the egg and the yolk. During this period the yabby remains firmly attached to its mother.

Three days later, the yabby moults and loses its swollen head. The egg is gone, but the yolk remains. During this period the yabby leaves its mother for short excursions and when it returns to mum it hangs onto her swimmerets. Young Australian yabbies hang onto their mum upside down, while young northern hemisphere crayfish hang the 'right way up', clinging to their mothers with their claws rather than with their tails. Often conditions become crowded under the mother's tail and the young crayfish crush each other.

Ten days after 'birth', the young yabby moults again. It now looks like a miniature adult, and leaves its mother permanently. Having left its mother, a young yabby often has a ball — literally. Yabby researcher Dr Jack Frost claims that when in turbulent waters, young yabbies clump together in small balls which roll with the water's currents, only to disconnect themselves and go their own way when the turbulence ceases.

Mating takes place in spring and summer. The yabby is not an exhibitionist and consequently its complete mating ritual has rarely been observed. The French seem more forward and naturalist Marc André was able to observe the entire mating performance of l'écrevisse, or French yabby:

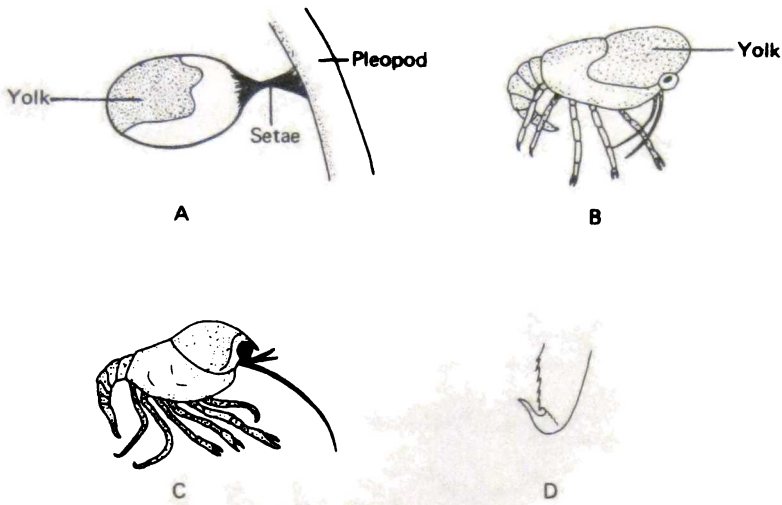


Diagram showing prejuvenile stages of development.

(A) Attachment of egg to pleopod; (B) First stage of young showing domed carapace; (C) Second stage of young; (D) Hooked tip of third and fourth walking legs of first, second and third stage young.

"The male crayfish actively search out the females. who do not seem to experience the same desire as the male for they are always escaping. Often in their ardour, the males kill the females. The males are in effect very agitated. If one of them meets a female, he seizes her with his claws and tries to tip her over. Before this happens the female tries to escape. Raising her body, and rapidly contracting the dilating rings of her tail, she leaps backwards up to a metre [yard]. The male races after her. A new battle begins, and a new retreat. Usually the male manages to seize her and tip her up. If not, he sometimes beats her with his claws. Other times he squeezes her so hard that he ruptures her insides. It is possible to observe the males thus killing the females with blows, striking again and again, and finally devouring them after having broken their bodies. Coupling often brings on the death of a large number of females."

The English zoologist Professor T.H. Huxley commented:

"Not content with mutilating or killing their spouses, after the fashion of animals of higher moral pretensions, male crayfish descend to the lowest depths of utilitarian turpitude and finish by eating them."

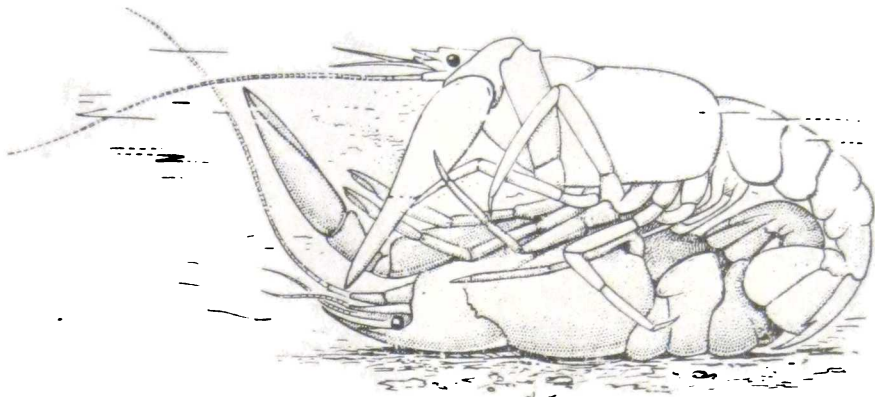
Whether the ocker crayfish is such a blatant male chauvinist yabby isn't known, but he is a cannibal. So too is the female.

Yabbies are at their cannibalistic worst in overcrowded conditions. However, they don't make a habit of eating each other. Normally their diet is varied but, given the choice, they're not, as is commonly believed, predominantly meat eaters. They're mostly vegetarians, favouring rotting leaves and plant detritus. If starved, they'll eat just about anything: vegetables, fish food, fish, chook pellets, lawn clippings, manure of any type, plants, wood, and meat — live, dead, fresh, rotten, or otherwise.

Contrary to popular opinion, yabbies will kill their own food. An Adelaide zoologist has observed yabbies waving their antennae on the surface of the water, attracting insects which are then killed and devoured. Yabbies placed in fish aquariums will kill and eat the fish. English crayfish have been reported to kill water voles (rodents) for food.

The yabby's anatomy and diet enable it to survive in a surprisingly varied habitat. It can tolerate water temperature extremes of between 1°C and 35°C (36°F and 95°F). It is most content in water temperatures between 20°C and 25°C (68°F and 77°F), which is the temperature usually recommended for tropical fish aquariums. When the temperature falls





The mating position of the freshwater crayfish.

below 16°C (61°F), the yabby becomes comatose. Metabolism and feeding stop, giving the appearance of deep sleep, or hibernation. Professional yabby fishermen take advantage of this trait by chilling their yabby catch to facilitate transport. Once the yabby arrives at its destination, it is 'thawed out', and is alive and nipping once more.

To fully appreciate the hardness of the yabby, consider the conditions of a 'turbulent' farm dam. During one year such a dam can undergo an enormous range of changes. In summer it can dry out. In winter it can be flooded or even frozen over. Oxygen levels fluctuate alarmingly; so too does the salinity content, yet the yabby seems able to not only survive, but thrive. Fish can't survive such changes, hence the yabbies dominate dams, and in certain areas yabbies can be remarkably abundant. Fishermen observe that yields of up to 1000 kg per hectare (900 lb per acre) per year can be sustained, although at this point the yabbies turn cannibalistic, thus regulating their own population explosion. The yabby is most prevalent in the arid regions of the Australian outback, where it's particularly adapted to survival. Its behaviour has been modified over thousands of years in order to establish survival in such harsh terrains. If conditions become too severe for the yabby — if, for example, waterholes begin to dry out during

droughts — the yabby often has two choices: it can go walkabout and migrate overland for short distances to healthier waterholes, or it can burrow beneath the dam and wait for water conditions to improve.

Yabbies can trek overland for a considerable distance — up to 2 km (1¼ miles) has been observed, but well over 3 km (2 miles) has been claimed — providing their gills can be kept moist. They usually trek during the night although in sub-tropical regions, where the ground-cover is always moist, crays frequently wander during the day. It is believed that yabbies have the sensory ability to detect and locate water during their treks. The yabby's migratory tendency is particularly worrying to would-be yabby farmers. The **National Times** reported this amusing anecdote:

*"One Riverina yabby breeder, who uses wild stock, came home one night to his yabby farm. The car headlights lit up 'millions of shining eyes'. They were his whole yabby crop suddenly taking off for other parts*

*"The outdoor rearing ponds had become less attractive than some distant stream or billabong"*

One yabby catcher told me he had filled the back of a utility with yabbies he found walking along the banks of the Edwards River in New South Wales. It was

early summer and water had been let out of the Stevens Weir. Yabbies in their thousands were washed over the spillway and into the river below the weir. The yabbies promptly marched out of the river, up along the bank, and were making their way back to their former home in the weir.

Yabby catchers along the Murray River wait for swamps to dry out in summer; then, they say, huge numbers of yabbies emerge to trek down to the Murray.

The yabby's ability to burrow is its most amazing attribute. Its habit of suddenly reappearing in large numbers in isolated waterholes which have been dry for years has been the cause of much debate. In the 1920s Melbourne's **Punch** pondered the mystery and at first suggested the theory of 'spontaneous regeneration' — that once a dam filled with water, the yabbies would appear, or be born, out of nothing. Several irate letters later, **Punch** conceded that the yabbies probably burrowed under the mud and waited for water.

If **Punch** was seeking awe-inspiring material about the yabby it should have considered what happens to the yabby after it burrows. A yabby's normal life time is thought to be in the vicinity of three years but when it burrows it enters into a state similar to suspended animation. It can live in its burrow for many years and prolong its life by the number of years it remains burrowed. Yabby researcher Ian Carstairs told me that when there's a drought and the water starts to dry up and the oxygen levels go very low, the yabbies start to burrow into the mud, leaving a little mud plug behind them. The burrow may be up to 2 m [6 ft] deep following the water-table, and the yabbies can live for maybe twenty years. One old fisherman up near Menindee, New South Wales, claimed that the Menindee Lake had been dry for twenty years, and that as soon as water came on it, some big old yabbies, beer bottle size, came out. He claimed they were probably twenty-year-old yabbies which had been living underground all that time in moist pockets of clay where they could maybe get some nutrition from roots and things, but living more or less in suspended animation. They've certainly been observed doing it for much shorter periods, over a year perhaps, but that fisherman claimed it could have been twenty years.

Dr Jack Frost reported that similar burrowing was noticed when the earth-moving equipment of the Irrigation Commission deepened a dry lake for water storage in the Menindee Lakes area of New South Wales. At a depth of three m [10 ft] underground, a series of holes were uncovered, each holding a large yabby. It was estimated that the lake had not been filled with water for the previous eight years.

In the Victorian Mallee, Lake Albacutya had been dry for many years. When it filled, yabbies were being caught in record yields. Also, the Albacutya yabbies behaved abnormally. They travelled in 'swarms' and could be caught in winter as well as summer. Normally the yabby hibernates in winter and cannot be caught, but a diver who entered the lake in the middle of winter said the lake bottom was literally crawling with yabbies.

In March 1947, **Wildlife** magazine reported:

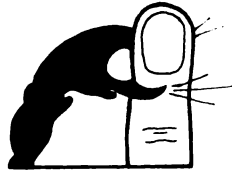
*"The giant Murray Cray has been found 37 ft [11 m] below the bed of an inlet channel, and in sewerage work in Allan street, Kyabram, a living and active specimen of the smaller yabby was found unearthed 20 ft [6 m] below the ground, and 6 to 8 chains [120 to 160 m] from the nearest irrigation channel, from which it had presumably burrowed."*

South Australian zoologist and noted astacologist Herbert M. Hale published Part 1 of **The Crustaceans of South Australia** in 1927. In it he wrote:

*"In arid districts the Yabby burrows deeply into the mud, and so aestivates during dry spells. A dam at Freeling contains numerous Yabbies; it is often dry during the summer and the bottom becomes a baked desolation covered with sun-cracks. At this time the crustaceans have been obtained 3 ft [1 m] below the surface of the mud. During the drought year of 1913 the creatures were found in the dry bed of the Onkaparinga, enclosed in underground cells beneath large stones."*



Jason Benbow ponders the workings of a yabby as part of a school project



## THE NOT-SO-POPULAR HISTORY OF THE YABBY

The yabby's history is not an illustrious one, although the Murray Cray got an early claw in on the international scene when it was described in Shaw's *Zoology of New Holland* in 1794. Four years later the North American freshwater crayfish first appeared in print when discussed by Fabricius. The American crawfish quickly became part of folklore, and U.S. history, particularly that of the southern states, is steeped in crawfish yarns.

Not so with the Australian yabby. Most Australians knew of the creature but deemed it unworthy of historical record, dismissing it as a dam pest. Some explorers did mention yabbies, or crayfish, in their journals.

Sir Thomas Mitchell reported a most interesting encounter. He spent the summer of 1831-32 wandering through the outback of New South Wales during a 107°F (41.7°C) heatwave, searching for the mythical river alluded to by the Kamilaroi Aboriginal tribe. He never found the river, but he did find crayfish. On 30 December 1831, he reached the Namoi River and made the following entry in his log:

*"In emptying the boat we found a crayfish resembling those which I had seen in the freshwater lagoons about Lake George. The remains of this crustacean were also abundant*

*there at places where water had been but very temporarily lodged."*

Beneath this entry, Sir Thomas noted:

*"A species of astacus which as far as I know comes very close to the common European crayfish."*

(*Astacus* is the scientific name for the major European crayfish genus.)

On 2 January 1832, he wrote:

*"I was truly sensible for the goodness of Providence considering that this was to all appearances the only water within many miles and on a plain where I had no reason to expect it. I could not see how the pond was supplied. Neither was this our only good fortune. for having directed Jones (one of our men ablest at fishing) to try the pond and to the small amusement of the men he in no time drew out a good dish of crayfish (lobsters as the men called them)."*

Sir Thomas named the billabong Lobster Ponds but on his return from the Barwon River he changed the name to Bombelli Ponds in honour of his courier, who was killed there by Aborigines.

In 1912 the biologist Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, a magistrate, published the two-volume work, *Across*

**Australia**, describing their travels through Central Australia. Spencer recorded the wildlife he encountered and wrote:

"The crayfish has accommodated itself in all kinds of natural surroundings in Australia."

When describing the wildlife he observed in the "lower steppe country" (referring to the southern reaches of the Finke River basin), he wrote:

"The crayfish [here] is identical with the one which, in Victoria, is known as the yabbie, and is always found in waterholes, but it is evidently a very hardy animal, capable of adapting itself to various conditions of life. In Victoria we never [find this] species except in waterholes which are normally full of water. In Queensland the crayfish burrows on hill-sides far away from water, and in Central Australia the same crayfish is often met with along the creeks, in the banks and beds of which it forms burrows, often with a pyramidal 'cast' over the entrance. Under normal conditions, in Victoria, it inhabits permanent pools and never needs to form a burrow, though it can do so if necessary. Some

years ago, the water was temporarily drained out of a large pond in the grounds of the Melbourne University, and, as soon as it was empty, the crayfish at once burrowed down and the muddy bed was dotted over with scores of pyramidal 'casts' from 6 in to 1 ft [15 cm to 30 cm] in height. It is one of the most widely distributed animals in Australia, the same species occurring in the permanent waterholes of Victoria and New South Wales, on the hill sides of Queensland, and all over the dry and arid areas of Central and West Australia.

"In both Victoria and Tasmania there is a special kind of little crayfish, popularly known as 'land crab', which is never found in waterholes, but always burrows in more or less damp ground, or under logs, in the scrub.

Aborigines were the first Australian yabby-fanciers. Anthropologists noted that crayfish remains were found on midden sites throughout the country. Early listings of the native languages showed that Aborigines had hundreds of names for yabbies and crays, and were therefore very familiar



*Painted by G. Hamblin.*

*The Murray River at Moorunde.*

Aboriginal yabbies at Moorunde as the explorer Eyre described them during his epic journey of discovery in the early 1840s.



with the crustaceans. Some Aborigines regarded crayfish as totem animals, and places were sometimes named after crayfish, for example, Yellami Boongalong, or Crayfish Creek, near Murchison, Victoria.

In 1841 the explorer Edward John Eyre observed:

*"At Moorunde, when the Murray annually inundates the flats, fresh-water crayfish make their way to the surface of the ground from holes where they have been buried during the year, in such vast numbers that I have seen four hundred natives live upon them for weeks together, whilst the numbers spoil or thrown away would have sustained four hundred more. This fish is an excellent and nutritious article of food, and would be highly prized by the epicure. It is caught by the women who wade into the water in a long close line, stooping down and walking backwards, whilst they grope with their hands and feet, presenting a singular, and to the uninitiated, an incomprehensible spectacle, as they thus move slowly backwards, but keep the line regular and well preserved, as all generally occupy the same position at one time. When a crayfish is caught the large claws are torn off to prevent the animal from biting, and both claws and body are put into a small net suspended from the neck for that purpose. In two or three hours a woman will procure as many fish as will last her family for a day. The men are too lazy to do anything when food is so abundant, and lie basking under the trees in luxurious abundance, whilst their wives, mothers, or sisters are engaged in cooking for them."*



Aborigines fishing for yabbies in the Murray River as they were portrayed in Herbert Hale's book *The Crustaceans of South Australia*.

In 1927 the South Australian zoologist Herbert Hale wrote:

*"The River Murray aboriginals found the Yabbie palatable."*

Yabbies provided part of the Aborigines' staple diet along the Darling-Barwon river systems too. Aborigines used to catch them by imitating the blue heron — puddling the water with a foot and then catching the yabbies as they bolted from the muddied water. Large aquatic crays were also captured by Darling River Aborigines and according to the **South Australian Register**, 1859, the crays were then:

*"... plentiful, many of them as large as a man's wrist, and excellent eating."*

Scattered reports suggest the early settlers enjoyed the yabby and the cray as food. In 1893 J. Douglas Ogilby's **Edible Fishes and Crustaceans of New South Wales** said:

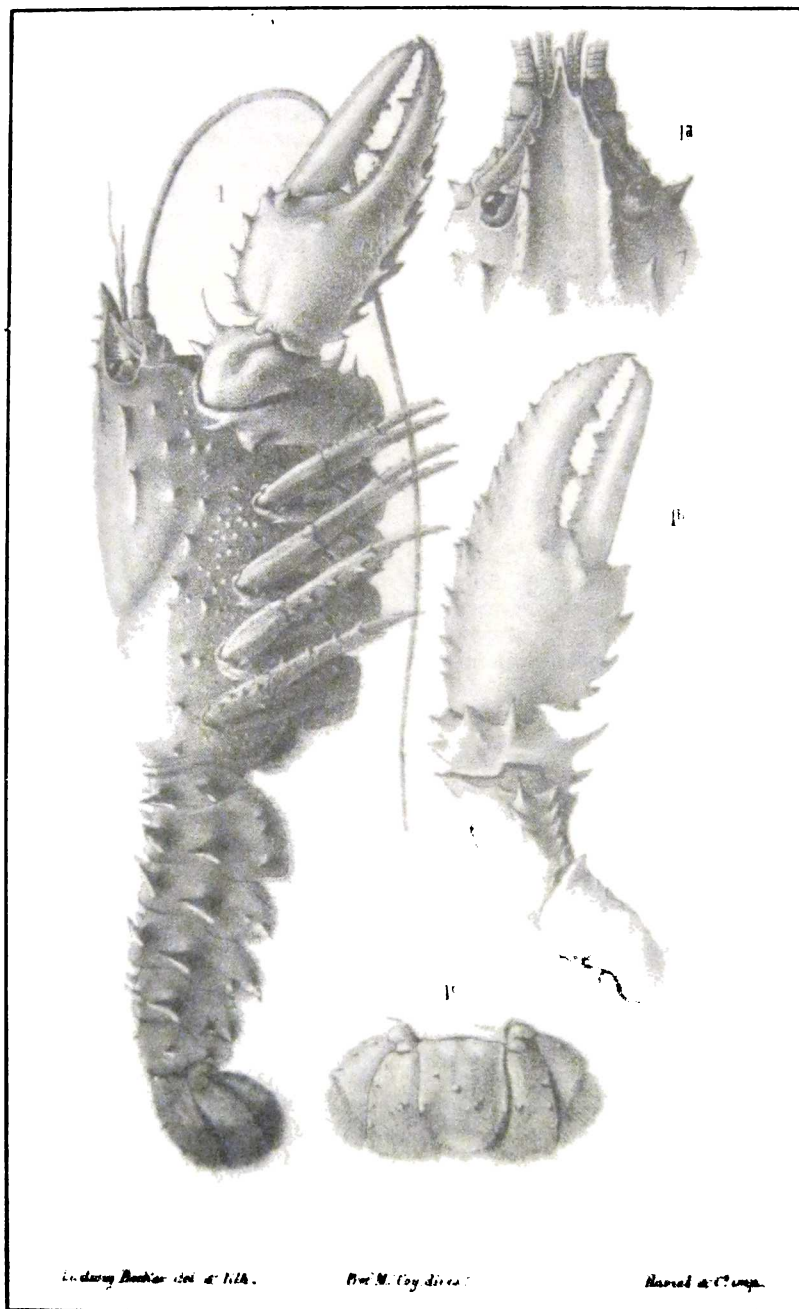
*"The river cray is rarely seen in Sydney market but it is widely used as food by the residents on the banks of the rivers, in which it abounds during the winter months, when they are in their best condition, and most readily caught."*

However, as early as 1867 Frederick McCoy, in the **Prodromus of the Zoology of Victoria**, mentioned the popularity of the Murray Cray in Melbourne markets:

*"The gigantic species [the Murray Lobster] is now sent to the Melbourne market in considerable quantity from the Murray by railway for the table instead of lobsters, and is by far the most delicious of the few Victorian crustacea good for food ... [It is] very common in the River Murray, where it is caught by lowering a piece of bagging, with cords and floats to the four corners, with some flesh in the middle; this being pulled up every now and then shows three or four of the 'lobsters' feeding; a bit of meat at the end of a string suffices to catch them."*

McCoy also mentioned the yabby, although not so ebulliently:

*"Commonly known about Melbourne by the native name of Yabber or Yabbie ... these are eaten in great numbers by the aborigines, and by some other people who like them."*



An early illustration of the Murray Cray from the *Prodrôme of the Zoology of Victoria* by Frederick McCoy, 1878.

Herbert Hale commented that in South Australia the yabby:

*"Often forms a welcome addition to the commissariat of camping parties. The flesh of the Murray Crayfish is esteemed as food. Settlers near the haunt of the crayfish sometimes use a hoop-net baited with rabbit to secure examples for the table."*

*"The one-time extensive lagoons and backwaters of the River Murray in South Australia harboured the species known as Yabbie in considerable number, but, since the comparatively recent reclamation of Murray lands, it is rare over certain areas. It was, for a time, plentiful in the irrigation drains there, and was a source of annoyance and expense owing to its persistent habit of burrowing into the banks and sides of the earth barriers."*

In 1925 Mr F.W. Shepherd reported in *The Australian Museum Magazine* that:

*"During many years' sojourn on the Barrier I have, with various parties, visited most of the dams and waterholes within a 25-mile [40 km] radius of Broken Hill for the purpose of obtaining yabbies."*

Geoffrey Smith reported, in 1909, that the giant Tasmanian crayfish was almost unknown:

*"The only people who eat it, or know anything about it, are a few prospectors and bushmen."*

The now highly regarded marron was also ignored by local historians in Western Australia. Marron researcher Dr N. Morrissy reported:

*"It is puzzling to note that marron are not recorded in accounts of early settlement . . . Saville-Kent (1897) failed to record marron in a book devoted to the oddities and extremes of the fauna . . . Fraser (1903) in notes on the natural history of West Australia did not mention marron. Both early explorers, for example Grey (1841) and Bunbury (1930), and documenters of the food of aborigines, for example Meagher (1974), failed to mention marron although other freshwater crayfish associated with coastal swamps (koonacs or gilgies) are recorded. However, Evans (undated) in a popular account of pioneering in the Pemberton district mentioned that the Warren tribe supplemented their diet with marron."*

The scientific naming of marron by

G.W. Smith in 1912 occurred much later than the naming of other types of crayfish.

The yabby was first scientifically described by the German naturalist Erichson, in 1846, but in 1936 Ellen Clark gave the yabby its current scientific name, *Cherax destructor*, and of course the 'destructor' referred to the damage the yabby caused to dams, irrigation channels, and bore drains. *Cherax* is a misspelling of the Greek word 'charax', meaning pointed stake, or a thing that scratches.

The yabby was almost declared a noxious pest in the 1920s, and its popularity reached a nadir in 1922 when it nearly wrecked the Waranga Basin in Victoria. The basin was one of the largest projects of its kind in the world at the time. It had a retaining wall 7 km (4½ miles) long and 12 m (40 ft) high, retaining some 405 900 000 m<sup>3</sup> (330 000 acre-feet) of water. In 1922 a number of leaks developed, ending in a crack 10 cm (4 in) wide and 9 m (30 ft) long, accompanied by a subsidence of 7 cm (3½ in) along the crest of its wall. A subsequent inquiry into the subsidence of the Waranga Basin blamed the damage on the yabby.

Many people claim that the yabby was very popular as a cheap food during the Great Depression of the 1930s but mentions of yabbies are mostly absent in records of the depression. Most early and mid-twentieth-century notes on the yabby merely chronicle its role as a pest.

During the 1940s and 1950s the New South Wales Department of Agriculture waged a DDT war on the yabby in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, determined to rid the irrigation channels of them once and for all. It's now interesting to note that during the early 1970s this same region emerged as one of the leading research centres for experimenting with the commercial cultivation of the yabby, and New South Wales government departments are now determining how to boost yabby populations.

The only on-going recorded history of the yabby and related species is the history of discovery and naming of species. But even this aspect is patchy and, as Ellen Clark points out, was very limited between 1870 and 1910.

Before 1870 explorers recorded observations, and most of the important



species were classified and named between 1840 and 1880. From 1910 onwards, new species were added to the list and later the often incorrect classifications were corrected. An intriguing account of a scientific expedition to procure specimens of a newly discovered crayfish was published in the *North Queensland Naturalist* in February 1936. The article has an historical charm worthy of republishing:

## THE HAUNT OF THE NORTH QUEENSLAND SPINY CRAYFISH

By Dr. H. FLECKER  
and PAT. O. FLECKER.

It was in February, 1935, that Mr. Tom Carr, a member of the North Queensland Naturalists' Club, reported the fact that a crayfish obtainable at Root's Creek was good eating, but when after cooking, a portion was given to a pup, which had partaken of the thoracic viscera, it became sick within half an hour and died next day! He was therefore requested to forward a specimen for the determination of its identity, etc. In due course there arrived at Cairns, in a hermetically sealed tin, which had previously contained golden syrup, a very fine specimen of a crayfish in spirit. After removal from the tin, it was dried in the sun and later referred to the Director of the Queensland Museum, Mr. Heber W. Longman, who discovered it to be the male of an entirely new species of *Astacopsis*. Hitherto this genus had never been known to occur further north than the Tambourine Mountains, south of Brisbane. The new crayfish was found to resemble the Tasmanian form, *A. franklini*, more closely than the southern mainland species, *A. serratus*, and as no species of *Astacopsis* has definitely been recognised from New Guinea, the origin of these crustacea in North Queensland is as yet a matter of speculation.

Inquiries from a number of individuals previously working in the Root's Creek area indicated that the crayfish was well-known to the residents of the district for many years, and that they had been frequently cooked and eaten, but it was suspected that other crustacea may have been mistaken for this species, for example, a

large shrimp, exhibited in spirit at a hotel in Mareeba was obviously different. Another large crustacean caught in the Mitchell River, at Brooklyn Station, was likewise not the object of our search, as it possessed quite insignificant chelae. During the winter of 1932, Dr. Darlington, an American collector for the Harvard Museum, who was accompanied by Mr. George Curry, the Curator of Lake Barrine, endeavoured to procure specimens, but was unsuccessful. Evidently he was unaware that this species was undescribed for he would otherwise have certainly persisted in his efforts.

Through the courtesy of Mr. Montague, of Mount Mulligan, formerly at Root's Creek, we were supplied with a crayfish trap, and with it we set out to seek specimens of the new *Astacopsis*, which was so greatly desired by the authorities at the Queensland Museum. Having set out from Mount Molloy on New Year's Day, 1936, a 16-mile [26 km] journey by the weekly motor lorry service brought us to Brooklyn Cattle Station, where, through the courtesy of the manager, Mr. Paul E. Hawkins, we stayed the night, incidentally baiting the trap with a large piece of raw meat and casting it into the Mary Creek, which flows into the Mitchell River, some 2 miles [3 km] further on and thence to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Next morning, although the meat had disappeared entirely, the trap contained only a yabbie, the species of which is not yet determined, but as discovered later on, certainly not the *Astacopsis*.

We were greatly assisted by Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins in our preparations for the object of our search, especially with provisions, swags and pack horses, etc., so accompanied by their juvenile son, Alva, who was much more familiar with equestrian management than we were, we set off from the droughty conditions prevailing at the station for Mount Spurgeon, some 10 miles [16 km] eastward, whence we travelled a further 6 miles [10 km] eastward to a clearing formerly known as Uralla, over which a new Zarda Tin Sluicing Company has taken a lease, and which it is proposed to call Zarda. Here we found shelter and congenial company from a number of "tin scratchers," to whom we are much indebted for their hospitality. The prevailing continuous moist conditions were in striking contrast to the exceedingly dry conditions of the plains.

Mount Spurgeon is said to be 3800 ft [1160 m] and Zarda 4000 ft [1200 m] above sea level, the latter situated on the Upper Mossman River. The trap was set at once, but found to be

of very little value, only one specimen being caught, not inside, but actually outside the trap to which it clung. Observation showed that the crayfish were able to seize the bait from outside the trap with the limbs bearing the smaller chelae.

It was not long before the first specimens were sighted, recognised and captured, the process of securing them being surprisingly simple. They are often seen in quite shallow waters, only a few inches [centimetres] deep, and upon approach, unlike the much more alert yabbies, do not suddenly dart beyond reach with a jerk or two of the tail, although obviously quite capable of doing so. If seen in deep water they can easily be lured into shallower reaches by the tempting meat bait. The water is everywhere absolutely clear despite much rain, and sandy bottoms are frequent, and as these creatures are not excessively timid and not easily alarmed, all that is necessary is for the captor, wearing sandshoes, to place his foot firmly over the back of the crayfish, then seizing it well behind the legs bearing the chelae to lift it out of the water. Great respect for the large chelae (claws or nippers) is essential, as it is calculated that a nip from these might cause serious injury to the fingers. Alternatively the crayfish may be seized by firmly embracing the legs containing the chelae.

Like yabbies these crustacea live in burrows on the banks of the streams. The banks of drains at Stewart's Creek and at the Upper Mossman River were continuously destroyed by these tunnels, and at Root's Creek had to be replaced by concrete.

Upon securing these specimens alive, the colour is seen to be a bright royal blue below, and much duller blue above, the spines affording a striking contrast being a deep red. A few immature specimens were noted to possess a somewhat ruddy colour above. Upon the first day nine specimens were secured altogether, including one from Platypus Creek, a tributary of the Mossman, which was easily driven out of the shallow water with a canecutter's knife on to the sandy bank, from which it was picked up. The whole nine were placed together in a four-gallon [18 L] petrol tin, standing upright and covered over by an ordinary kitchen dish used for washing up, but next morning it was discovered that with one exception, all had escaped. It appears that they stand upright on their chelae in a corner of the tin, tail uppermost, until a portion of the telson catches against the cut edge of the tin, thence they were able to lift themselves over

the edge and escape. None of these could be found in the morning.

However another eighteen or so were captured later, the localities being all east of the Great Divide, namely, the Upper Mossman River and two of its tributaries, the Platypus and Root's Creeks. One was caught in a water race constructed by the miners, and another on the steep, jungle-clad slope of a hill, three chains [60 m] from the nearest water. This latter did not appear to be an isolated freak, as the miners report having secured a number in the jungle away from the creeks. It is to be understood that the whole undergrowth is decidedly damp. Although informed that some were obtainable at Stewart's Creek, the head waters of the Daintree River, none were found after a considerable search, although burrows provided evidence of their presence.

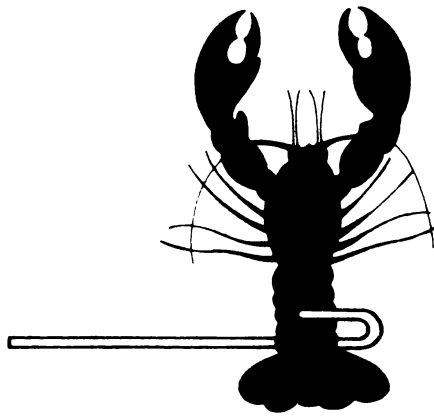
Root's Creek was originally reported by one of us to be 90 miles [145 km] west of Cairns, but this is incorrect, but it must be understood that there are no roads, and that none of these localities. Mount Spurgeon, Upper Mossman River and its two tributaries have been surveyed. As a matter of fact, Root's Creek Falls, near the Root's Creek mining camp, is but 2 miles [3 km] from the Zarda clearing, and is only 10 miles [16 km] north-west of Mossman, from which it may be reached by a difficult foot track.

Although capture of these specimens proved simple enough, the problem of bringing them down in good condition was much more difficult. It was, of course, impracticable to bring sufficient spirit to preserve them in, and even if such were available, to secure suitable receptacles and to carry them by pack horses was quite beyond our resources, so it was decided to make an attempt to bring [them] to Cairns alive in moist sugar bags. The showers which fell from time to time greatly assisted us in this direction. Our largest specimen measured 10½ inches [26 cm] from the tip of the rostrum to the end of the telson, as compared with the 9 inches [23 cm] of the original type, and this was carefully kept separately in a bag, the others being all kept together in another bag. At Brooklyn Station, where two nights were spent awaiting the weekly lorry and train service, the bags were placed out in the rain, where all except five survived. The inevitable damage of limbs by mutual combat was taken into account and it was calculated that the detached fragments might be reassembled at a later date. Carriage in a railway compartment was

negotiated by placing the sacks in a botanical vasculum.

Arrived at Cairns, the crustacea were at once immersed in a bucket of methylated spirit and allowed to remain there two days. They were then taken out for the purpose of drying, and it is believed that had the weather been fine this process might have sufficed as with the type specimen, but the seasonal summer rains had set in well, and the problem of keeping off the ants proved a difficult one. It is unfortunate, perhaps, that pressure of other work prevented returning the specimens to suitable spirit containers, so that they were eventually placed in a cream tin full of diluted formalin, ordinarily intended for botanical purposes.

The crayfish was incorrectly classified as belonging to the **Astacopsis** genus, and named **Astacopsis fleckerii**. It was later reclassified to the **Euastacus** genus and given its current name, **Euastacus fleckerii**.



## TO CATCH A YABBY

Let's not argue the toss. The best way to catch a yabby is the way you can catch a yabby best. There are no rules, except in some states where legislation limits the size and number of yabby pots or traps, the size of the crayfish, or prohibits the taking of 'berried' females — females with eggs.

Most seasoned yabbiers are a rather anarchistic lot, preferring to quietly do their own yabby thing their own way where and when it suits them, and bugger the rules. Yabbiers I've spoken to tend to view any laws pertaining to yabbies as 'unnatural'. During the period 1971 to 1979, most Victorian yabbiers were in fact criminal crustacean catchers because fishing for yabbies without a fishing licence was illegal, but charges were never laid.

No 'profile' of the type of people who catch yabbies has been compiled, but the Western Australian researcher Dr Noel Morrissy has made such a study of marroners. The marroner proves to be an entirely different personality from the angler. Marroners, according to Dr Morrissy, have historically tended to be agricultural, mining, or forestry workers. Marroners tend to be loners, and do not form associations or clubs as readily as fishermen. Marroners avoid popular spots, preferring the

least accessible and most unknown areas, and they marron mainly at night. This makes enforcement of regulations difficult, and that's exactly how the marroners want it because, like yabbiers, they resent rules and regularly abuse legislation governing sizes and closed seasons.

A professional yabby cultivator observed, through bitter experience, that one of the problems encountered when he was trying to commercially harvest yabbies was that everybody thought it was their right to go and fish yabbies wherever they wanted. It was, he claimed, quite difficult to persuade them otherwise. If he tried to keep them out of an area that had yabbies in it, they would break down the fences or burn the logs. Poachers appear to pose a definite problem.

Violence occurred in the Victorian Mallee when professional yabby catchers tried to limit amateur yabbiers' catches. The incidents culminated in gunfire and 'yabby rustling', or stealing from pots.

The methods of catching yabbies are as varied as the yabbies themselves. It all boils down to what the individual yabbier wants — sport, a quick feed, or a simple method of acquiring fishing bait.

## The Basic Meat 'N' String Method

This traditional method of catching yabbies, particularly popular amongst children, provides the most sport. Kate Cameron, writing in the **Australian Gourmet**, had this to say about yabbying à la meat 'n' string:

*"On the surface deceptively simple, yabbying is an art that requires skill, patience and courage; provides a spice of danger, and is utterly relaxing. The comparative fierceness of the prey takes the sport out of the realm of boredom (without taking it into the nerves of steel category) as a 6 in [15 cm] yabby has enough claw strength to remove the top joint of your little finger quite effectively.*

*"... The adrenalin charge of danger in this sport is hardly enough to have one in fear of life and limb (fingers and toes, perhaps, but even as cautious as I am, I cannot see a crayfish taking one's leg off at the knee), and certainly not enough to spoil one's enjoyment of standing knee-deep in water, strainer in one hand, cool drink in the other, watching and waiting for some activity on your lines."*

The meat 'n' string method costs virtually nothing. All you need is a few wooden stakes, some 1 to 1.2 m (3 to 4 ft) lengths of strong cotton, and perhaps a cheap scoop net. The process is as follows: bang the stake into the side of a dam (or 'tank' if you live in western New South Wales). Tie one end of the cotton to the stake and tie the bait to the other end of the cotton. The bait should be a piece of meat high on odour and blood content, low on fat. Fatty meat is useless because it floats. Smelly meat is fine because the odour helps attract the prey. Bloody smelly meat is perfect because the blood permeates the waterhole, inviting all resident yabbies to the fine meal in the offing.

Throw the meat into the water and wait. A few minutes later — sometimes a few seconds later — a series of tugs will draw the cotton taut, signalling that a yabby is chewing the bait and trying to drag it back to its burrow. When this happens, begin to draw the cotton towards you. Slowly and evenly does it, don't jerk. Develop a sense of how long your cotton line is, so that when you pull it in you'll know exactly where the

bait is hidden underneath the water before you strike with your net. If you wait until you can see the bait and attached yabby, then the yabby will be able to see you too. Chances are it won't hang about.

Avoid pulling the bait through weeds or over snags. This helps telegraph your intentions, warning the yabby that fishy business is at hand. If you pull the cotton too quickly or violently, or over snags, the yabby will give a series of short sharp tugs and the line will go limp. This means that as well as being a clumsy yabbier, you are also an unsuccessful one, because your yabby has just shot through.

The successful yabbier, having pulled the line in smoothly, and having judged that a quick decisive arm action will bring the net up underneath and behind the bait-clutching yabby, will do just that and will, in all probability, catch the darned thing. Generally speaking, the larger the yabby, the smarter and speedier it is. A cunning yabby can often disengage the bait and escape the mad rush of your net. A powerful yabby, if caught in the net, can sometimes flick itself up and out. Especially if a kitchen strainer is used as a net. It's commonplace for yabbiers to use strainers or colanders, but these are inferior because the rigidity of the surface gives the yabby some purchase to flick its tail and be gone. A superior net can be made from the frame of an old strainer to which a length of professional netting is attached, or a length of cut-off stocking, or even curtain material which has a large enough mesh to let the water (but not the yabby) run through. If water can't run through the net easily the net tends to drag, slowing down the action of the strike and prematurely tiring the yabbier's arm. Some yabbiers view the use of scoop nets with disdain, electing instead to catch the yabby with cupped hand, or to flick it out of the water.

If the yabbies are 'on the bite', half a dozen lines can keep the yabbier constantly occupied, and half a dozen or more yabbies can be caught on each piece of bait at a time. If the yabbies aren't on the bite, best to try new waters. The meat 'n' string method is best used in dams which have murky water and a fairly steep incline. The yabby catching season is summer — the

hotter the better. If conditions have been dry and the dam's water level is lower than usual, then the yabbies should definitely be biting. Yabby fishing folklore has it that there are 'on' and 'off' seasons, that even if conditions are perfect there might be no yabbies biting in a dam which was teeming with them the previous season. There is no explanation for this phenomenon, but it does occur in the biblical sense of good years followed by lean years — usually, three or four good years followed by one or two lean years.

The meat 'n' string method is mostly used in the daytime, but yabbies can be caught at night with pots or drop nets.

## Bait

A quick word about bait, a bone of contention amongst yabblers. All yabblers claim their bait is the best. Most prefer bullock's liver, but it has to be replaced regularly because the water leaches it. Professional yabby catchers swear by fish, mainly because it doesn't leach as quickly as meat. The following baits have also proven effective: worms, mussels, rabbit, hare, kangaroo, fox, chicken and chicken offal, beef and mutton, sheep's heads ("Sheep's head mate, 14 days old and split in half — there's not the yabby alive that can resist it," is what one old yabbier told me), birds, wild pig, and snake. I've also seen children using laundry soap. It works, but I don't know why.

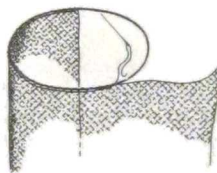
## Nets

Prawn or shrimp nets can be used to drag, or sweep, a snag-free dam. Professional bait catchers use these nets to expedite proceedings but it is a rather dull, unimaginative method for the amateur to employ to test his mettle against the yabby. Ecologically, it's a disaster. Several sweeps can wipe out a dam's yabby population. Definitely not recommended.

Using drop, or hoop, nets is recommended. Such nets consist of two metal rings, one large 56 cm (22½ in) diameter, one small 36 cm (14½ in), joined by

mesh. Three short ropes are attached at regular intervals to the large ring, and the ropes are tied together at the other end to form a sort of pyramid. To these ropes, a longer rope is tied, and to the end of this rope a block of polystyrene or a detergent bottle, or something floatable, is attached.

Bait is tied to the mesh at the bottom of the net, or suspended from the apex of the rope pyramid. When thrown in the water, the net collapses. It lies flat. The smaller ring sits in the centre of the larger ring and the bait sits in the centre of it all. The float marks the net's position. This buoy also aids the recovery of the net, for which a long pole with a curved forked end — a 'fluking stick' — is used. The fork is slipped against the rope, under the float, and the net is then pulled up and out. When raised, the smaller ring drops down, the net opens up, and the yabbies are trapped. Drop nets can be bought at sports stores, or made by following these simple instructions:



Step 1

Mesh is sewn around the top ring (or commercially the top ring is threaded through top mesh and then joined)

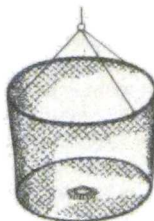


Step 2

Net is suspended to allow even placement of bottom ring (see step 3)

Side is sewn up

Sewing here is threaded through lower edge meshes and then gathered (commercially a small ring is used)



Step 3

Bottom ring is pushed down tightly and sewn on to the mesh to give a tightly stretched bottom (commercially it is threaded and joined)

Incidentally, discarded de-spoked bicycle wheel rims are perfect for drop net frames. Some Murray Cray catchers use a wheel with spokes intact. Bait is tangled in the spokes and the cray also becomes entangled when it tries to extricate the bait. Drop nets are particularly suited to rivers and large tracts of water where they can be easily picked up and dropped from a boat.

A variation of the drop net is the kero-tin-with-holes, an old favourite with bushies of a bygone era. Small holes are punched in the bottom of the tin. Bait is attached to the bottom, and a rope to the top. The whole shebang is then thrown into the water. Some yabbiers use drop nets or kero-tins suspended in the water from long poles.



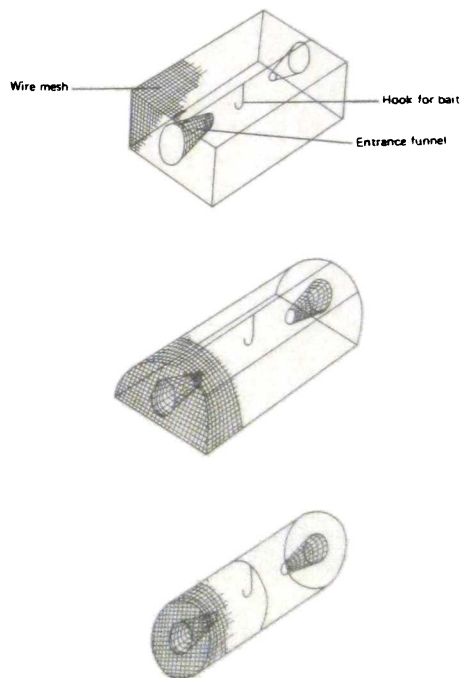
Above: Double-ring French crayfish net.  
Below: Single-ring French crayfish net.

## Traps or Pots

Yabby pots work on the same principle as the more commonly known crayfish pots. They can be bought from sports stores but tend to be pricey. Make your own.

To make an envelope pot, fold a square metre (9 sq ft) piece of chicken wire to form an envelope. Use a beer bottle to shape a funnel in each corner of the pot. Suspend a large bait-holding hook from the centre of the pot where the folds join. Stitch the folds together but leave one fold unstitched so bait can be put in and, hopefully, yabbies taken out.

Various other types of pots can be made. Three of the most commonly used designs are:



Designs for yabby pots commonly used by Australian yabbiers.

## Other Methods of Catching Yabbies

1. Diving into the water and catching the yabbies by hand, or grabbing their antennae and pulling them out of their holes.

2. Dangling toes and/or other appendages into the water and letting the yabbies latch on (ouch).

3. Spearing yabbies. Popularly used by Papua New Guinea natives and adventurous boys. A small spear, sometimes with a spray of fine spikes at the business end, is thrust into the yabby's 'chest'.

4. Yabbies can be found under rocks and sunken logs in shallow waters. They can also be dug out of the mud at the bottom of recently emptied dams.

5. Yabbies can be picked from weir overflows, or in the overflow from flooded dams. A yabby on walkabout is easy game.

Cans and bottles are favourite hiding places for yabbies. Some crafty youngsters won a competition for the most yabbies caught in an afternoon at Albert Park Lake, Melbourne. The lads were subsequently disqualified when it was discovered that they hadn't actually 'fished', but had plucked their haul out of cans. Often a large yabby can be found trapped inside a beer bottle — obviously it squeezed in seeking shelter in which to moult and, after moulting and growing, could not squeeze out again.

## Aboriginal Methods of Catching Yabbies

Aborigines often catch yabbies by imitating birds — stirring up the mud and grabbing the bewildered yabby as it backs out of the muddied water. Queensland Aborigines used a 'lawyer vine' to catch yabbies. Wildlife writer Stan Tutt describes the vine and how Aborigines used it:

*"Old-timers will recall the unfriendly lawyer vine — dense jumbles of prickly vines covered in long spiny hairs and armed with many thin wire-like green tendrils well over 1 m [3 ft] in length. All along these strong tendrils are rows of sharp barbs.*

*"Aboriginal women and boys used these long barbed tendrils to catch yabbies. They broke or cut tendrils from the vines and then looked for yabby holes which were full of water. A small stick or the end of a tendril was wriggled in the water in the top of the hole gently, as an insect struggled after it fell into the water.*

*"Presently the yabby's feelers appeared as it investigated the movement. The lawyer vine was then slipped down the hole with the barbed hooks facing upwards. A twist and a pull, and the hooks on the tendril caught the yabby's legs, and whisked it up and out."*

South Australian zoologist Herbert Hale described (after Worsnop) how Aborigines caught yabbies at the turn of the century:

*"The fisher puts between his teeth an ordinary rush bag, to hold the crayfish, which he first dislodges with his toes and then catches them with his hands, bagging them rapidly."*

## Catching Murray Crays

Murray Crays, and most other aquatic crays, are best caught at night, although they can be caught during the day. The Murray Cray season is almost opposite to the yabby's. Crays can only be caught in winter or, as old cray-hands have it, the crays crawl in the months which have no 'r': May, June, July, August. Conversely, yabbies say yabbies can be caught only in the months which do have an 'r'.

The yabbier's meat 'n' string method, or the 'primitive angle' as cray connoisseurs call it, is very rarely used to catch Murray Crays. Some people delight in catching Murray Crays with a fishing rod and reel and baited hooks, but this is best left to the 'experts'. Drop nets are most commonly used, and the baits are the same as those used for yabbies.

Stalking the Murray monsters has traditionally been a pastime reserved for river-folk, but recently the Murray Cray's



fame has spread and come winter-time, thousands of rubber-booted predators clog the river with aluminium craft, getting in each other's way, fouling propellers on hidden drop net lines, and Lord knows what else. Alf Wessel reported in the **Australian Outdoors** magazine that:

*"Winter camping on the Murray River is increasing in popularity and the main reason is the crayfish. On the long weekend in June 1977 I found twenty-two camps on one beach and my neighbour told me it was nearly impossible to navigate a boat between the cray nets."*

A few words of warning to would-be crayfish fishers:

1.  
Make certain boats are equipped with powerful lights if night fishing is contemplated. Distances are misleading at night and the river can be treacherous.

2.  
Wear strong shoes. A savage cray running amok on the bottom of a boat is not to be taken lightly. And, of course, jerking around trying to protect feet from flailing claws could result in an overturned boat.

3.  
Wear leather or gardening gloves to protect hands from the cray's sharp spikes. Crays spend their life in the muck at the bottom of the river and one spike prick could not only prove painful, but could also result in infection. Gloves protect against rope burns, but not claw bites. A large cray will chop through a glove and possibly the hand inside.

## Catching Marron

If you happen to be in Western Australia, standing by the edge of a lake or river, and you notice a strange character bent forward slushing and wading through the water, armed with a long scoop, and looking like some demented miner who has just emerged from a ten-year stint down a deep coal mine and is still wearing his hat with an inbuilt light on his head, don't panic. This is perfectly normal — in Western Australia. This is your typical well-equipped marroner on the hunt. Marron fishing has long been a popular pastime way out west, and local

fishermen have perfected two unusual methods of catching marron:

1.

Scoop netting. A favoured technique for shallow waters. Bait (sometimes meat, sometimes chook pellets) is scattered in the water. The marroner, his path and prey lit by the light on his hat, tries to scoop up the marron with a large chicken-wire net on a long pole. The light-in-the-hat refinement was originally used by the coal miners of the Collie district in south-west Western Australia, where marron abound. Miner marroners wore the same carbide lamps they used while working the coal pits. As the technique became popular, the carbide lamps were replaced with battery-generated lights, the battery usually carried on the back of the belt.



A miner's hat and chicken wire scoop net form the basis of the marron fisherman's equipment.

2.

Snaring. A delicate, skilful way to catch a marron. Diehards reckon it's the **only** way. E.A. Riley Jnr, in the book **Freshwater Fishing in South West Australia**, described his initiation to the technique:

*"Bob had been downstream searching for a good possie to catch marron. He*

immediately took possession of two redfin and after cleaning them he cut off the heads. Then he demanded two lengths of cord onto which he tied two small rocks. Those rocks were to serve as sinkers and the perch heads, one threaded on each cord, as bait. This done, the baits were lowered into the water, and the free end of each cord tied to protruding branches of trees hanging over the water.

"Bob fashioned a marron snare, from copper wire and a stout bush-stick. Then, with the expertise of a true bushman, proceeded to show me how to snare marron. There must have been at least thirty of them, milling around each bait, and of these Bob proceeded to snare half with apparent ease. As each, in turn, grabbed the bait Bob gently worked the wire loop over the tail section. And when the dividing line between the tail and the body (carapace) was reached, he'd steadily tighten the loop and pull each frantic, struggling 'black spider' out of the water. In no time at all we had thirty large specimens, chattering away in an old moistened spud bag. I looked on with admiration, as these beauties averaged 28 cm [11 in] in total length, considering them as good average specimens (for those days)."

Marron are also caught with drop nets. The best marron seasons are early and late summer, and, because marron don't eat as much during the day, most marroning is done at night. Lore has it that marron catches are poor on full moon nights. Marron can be caught during the day in turbid muddy waters, usually farm dams.

## Catching the Giant Tasmanian Crayfish

Snaring à la marron is sometimes used. The yabbiers meat 'n' string method is commonly used, but on a larger scale to match the prey: tough cord replaces cotton, and large chunks of meat are used as bait. Instead of a stake, a stout thick stick is employed. The stick is jammed under logs or in backflows in small creeks. When the cray attacks the meat, the stick swivels and jerks. The cray is carefully raised and landed with a net similar to that used to land a trout.



The search for the giant Tasmanian crayfish, *Astacopsis gouldi*, begins in forest country like this.

## Catching Land Yabbies

Land yabbies are useful only as bait, and catching them can be an arduous task. One fisherman described his method:

*"The indications of a yabby colony are cones or holes about 1/2 in [1 cm] across, which may cover an area of 5 to 6 sq ft [approx. 0.5 sq. m]. All the holes converge into one central chamber, which bottoms on clay and contains water. They burrow near a gutter where water flows after heavy rain, which replenishes their supply, though they do not seem to depend on water for life.*

*"When a colony has been located, dig down to the chamber or well, stir up the silt until the water is quite thick, then bale it out, pouring the water down the holes left untouched. As the yabbies do not like muddy water this drives them into the central well, where they can be picked out as they appear on the surface of the mud. I have had as many as two hundred yabbies from one hole."*

Fisheries and Wildlife.

No crayfish can be sold unless a commercial fishing licence is obtained. This is generally a complex and expensive procedure, and fines for non-compliance are severe. Again, when in doubt check with Fisheries and Wildlife officers.

## How to Handle a Yabby

Carefully. To pick up a yabby or cray, grab it firmly behind the claws. The claws cannot bend back far enough to nip.

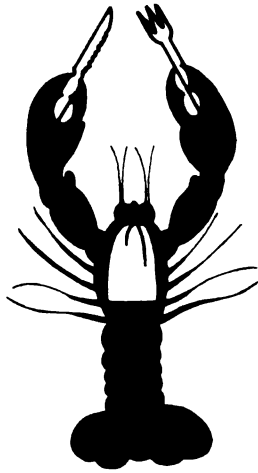
## Yabby Catching Laws

Laws regulating yabby catchers have been only recently introduced in Victoria, South Australia, and New South Wales. Laws mostly deal with crayfish sizes and catching equipment.

Egg-bearing female Murray Crays can never be taken, and a New South Wales fishing licence must be obtained for fishing in the Murray River.

Rules regarding marron in Western Australia and the Tasmanian cray are quite strict.

All crayfish laws have been, and probably will continue to be, subject to frequent change, and so they are not listed in this book. Yabbiere wishing to be legit should contact the local Department of



## THE CLAWS THAT REFRESHES: YABBY CUISINE

The French do it, Swedes do it, but not all Australians do it — eat yabbies. An Australian adage says: "Yabbies are the food of Frenchmen, redfin, and the platypus." Many Australians who catch yabbies do so only for the sport and leisure, and would never dream of eating their catch. Radio personality Bob Rogers spent many hours as a child catching yabbies near his home town of Donald, Victoria, but he had never considered eating them, and hadn't tasted them until early 1979 when he was confronted with a platter of yabbies at an expensive restaurant.

The listing of yabbies as a food item is surprisingly absent from most accounts of pioneers' and settlers' lives. Folklorist John Meredith considers it strange that yabbies never get mentioned as a food in any of the annals of the 1890s. One would have thought that for a swaggy, camped in the bend of a river, a few yabbies would be an acceptable addition to his "nice little cod-fish and four little johnnie cakes". But no, yabbies may as well have been non-existent as far as the bushies were concerned, although the Aborigines went for them with enthusiasm.

Australians who banish yabbies from the dinner table profess to do so because they regard the yabby as a strange

unwholesome-looking creature, because it's fished from murky muddy waters, or because it eats detritus and dead animals, and relishes abhorrent bait.

Sylvia Mowat Finlay, a food writer for the **Sydney Morning Herald**, commented:

*"There was a time when one's little brother waited, motionless, on the muddy bank of a creek with a bit of putrid meat tied to the end of a string. Something would grab it and he would draw it up slowly, imperceptibly, then scoop a yabby into his net. The same grubby brother would cook and eat it with bravado, while we looked down our noses and wondered how it was possible for him to feign such enjoyment."*

*"Yet all the time the greatest chefs in Europe were probably cooking the creature and serving him to kings."*

*"Alas, for the wasted years"*

Historically, Australians have not been avid fish eaters, let alone yabby consumers. A book entitled **The Art of Living in Australia**, published in the early nineteenth century, noted:

*"That fish should be comparatively speaking so scarce in Australia can only be regarded in the light of a national calamity. I have been told when making inquiries that the*

reason why fish is so dear is that this is not a fish eating colony, and that consequently there is no demand for it."

Australians began to take seafood and other fish more seriously in the wake of the arrival of immigrants from seafood-oriented countries. Anyone for scampi? The aversion to eating yabbies has a particularly deep-seated basis among Australians derived from Anglo-Saxon stock, for traditionally the freshwater crayfish has been held in contempt by the English. As much as the English rejected the French habit of eating snails, they also spurned the European practice of ingesting loathsome river parasites.

In 1880 the English zoologist Professor T.H. Huxley observed:

*"In England we do not set much store upon crayfishes as an article of food, but on the Continent, and especially in France, they are in great request. Paris alone, with its two millions of inhabitants, consumes annually from five to six millions of crayfishes."*

Throughout Europe the crayfish has, as the English would say, a 'right royal history', although its beginnings were somewhat humble. During the heyday of the Roman Empire crayfish were the food of the poorer classes. Slaves ate them as they caught them. A little later Roman nobles began to value the crayfish, and crayfish destined for the royal tables were first fattened in earthenware pots specifically designed for the purpose. Germany, Holland, France, Poland, Russia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria, Norway, Finland, and Sweden all took to the crayfish.

Researcher Reinhard Spitzy detailed its history in Austria:

*"As far as we can trace back the relevant chronicles, crayfish were plentifully represented in the streams, rivers and lakes of the Habsburg Empire. They were in great demand as a dish for both feasting and fasting. In the fifteenth century, Emperor Maximilian I, and before him the Prince-Archbishops of Salzburg, drew up exact rules for catching and sparing crayfish. The minimum size was burnt into the oars of the fishing boats. The fine for ignoring the minimum size was about a hundred times the normal value of the crayfish catch."*

*"The temporal feudal lords and in particular the princes of the church had, of course, first choice. But there was still enough left over for the run of the mill mortal, indeed there was enough for illegal export to Verona in Italy. The stock seemed almost inexhaustible and a large number of recipes, some of which were quite extraordinary, bear witness to the interest and imagination of the great cooks of days gone by. The crayfish were kept in containers and fattened, and monasteries had famous secret processes. Before being cooked the poor animals had their middle tail-fin and so their intestine pulled out after having been made to walk in cream and schnapps. In Austria, in contrast to Scandinavia, crayfish were always eaten warm."*

Napoleon ate crayfish at Marengo with the now-famous chicken dish. The great chef Escoffier (who, incidentally, created Peach Melba) introduced crayfish to English haute cuisine when, at London's Carlton Hotel, he fashioned them into mousses, timbales, and soufflés.

Swedes revere the crayfish to the extent that it's virtually a national food, and eating crayfish is a sort of ceremony conducted during the annual crayfish festival. Crayfish were introduced to Sweden sometime during the sixteenth century. In 1588 Duke Johann, the son of the Swedish King Gustav Wasa, requested his Finnish governor to send crayfish to Sweden for the King. At the beginning of this century, Swedish crayfish catching was limited to an official season to conserve stocks. The now-exiled Shah of Iran featured crayfish on the menu of his extravaganza commemorating the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire in 1971. The menu included:

*Quail eggs stuffed with Persian caviar*

*Mousse of crayfish tails in Nantua sauce*

*Stuffed rack of roast lamb*

*Roast peacock stuffed with foie gras*

*Fig rings*

*Raspberry champagne sherbet*

In the 'new world' crayfish, wherever indigenous, were eaten by natives. Numerous references to yabbies in the diet of Australian Aborigines have been recorded. New Zealand Maoris ate crayfish and the government now restricts

crayfishing rights in certain lakes to the Maori population. In Papua New Guinea's Lake Wessell region natives fished crayfish intensively. In the U.S.A. Indian legend is rich in crayfish lore. Crayfish were also eaten in the West Indies, in the islands most directly off the American coast. The crayfish is referred to in the **First Three Books on America**, compiled between 1511 and 1555:

*"In a certeyne region called Zenu, lyinge foure seore and tenne myles from Darieana eastwarde they founde . . . baskets made of the twigges and leaues of certeyne trees apte for that purpose, being full of crefysyes, all well dried and salted."*

In southern U.S.A., particularly the state of Louisiana, the early French influence has imbued the citizens with such a taste for crawfish that today it could best be described as a mania. The local Atchafalaya (pronounced chaf-ah-lie-yah) swamp basin is known as 'Cajun-land'. Cajuns, descended from French-Nova Scotian refugees, base a part of their fishing economy on crayfish. They, together with the Creoles of New Orleans, have devised a number of uniquely southern spicy recipes: crayfish gumbo and jambalaya being two of the most renowned. It is said that the crawfish is to Cajun-land what roast beef is to England.

Popular Louisiana writing about the crawfish almost echoes Australian sentiments about the yabby. The crawfish is said to be pugnacious, hearty, adaptable, humorous and courageous, and it's the hero of more than a hundred ribald folk tales.

However, far more emphasis is given to the preparation of the Louisiana crawfish than is given to the Australian yabby. The Louisiana crawfish season is regarded as a "Springtime fancy — more than just a food item. It's a way of life."

Mel Washburn, an officer with the New Orleans Fishery Committee, reported:

*"Louisiana's lowly mudbug has for more than two hundred years been one of the succulent delicacies of Creole cuisine, an object of awe and speculation by the tourist, but a common food for the table, and a delight on a picnic in the greater part of the state during the late winter and spring months."*

*"Louisiana, of course, has no monopoly on crawfish eating, but nowhere else in the world*

*are crawfish eaten in the amount they are devoured in the southern part of the state, and, although they may now be considered a seasonal delicacy, sufficiently expensive to be included on the menus of our finest food emporiums, they have never lost their popularity with the general populace."*

*"The crawfish was a necessary food for the earliest settlers, and its rich, highly seasoned potency was also an invention of necessity. Like the gumboes, the crawfish bisque came into being with its rich spicy flavour because of the condiments the Creole housewife was compelled to use. Bay leaf, thyme, onions and garlic were ready to hand and free for the picking. Consequently, the cooks of early Louisiana learned to blend them with the crawfish, and the dishes that have become world famous came into being, not as a dish to tempt the jaded appetite of a gourmet, but simply as a food for the table that all could afford. Today the mud bug has climbed to a commercial status on a par with the finest steaks."*

The centre of the crawfish boil in Louisiana is Breau Bridge, a small town which has invested itself with the title Crawfish Capital of the World, and conducts a bi-annual crawfish festival to stamp an unofficial seal to its title.

Elsewhere in the U.S.A., crawfish is not so popular as a food. However, Louisiana marketing experts, eager to spread the crawfish gospel, have devised a marketing strategy which they hope will persuade people other than Louisianans to eat crawfish. The market researchers' profile of a typical non-native crawfish eater is "most likely well educated, middle income and over thirty years of age". From this profile, the campaign's battle-plan was drawn: getting the lower middle classes to eat crawfish is the ultimate aim, and the best way to achieve this is, they say, to first convert the upper class. According to the theory:

*"Upper middle class families have achieved success. With high education and assurance of occupational competence, we find a lack of adherence to group norms. They seem determined to separate themselves from the middle majority. The upper middle class housewife feels more confident in her shopping. Therefore they are more venturesome in shopping and seek new stores and new*

experiences. They prefer speciality shops and distrust the more general outlets. The outlets must be staffed with competent individuals appropriately aware of the status of the consumer. Perhaps crawfish dishes served in fine gourmet restaurants would provide a unique opportunity for expressing their individualism.

"The lower middle class have an essentially 'horizontal' orientation. They strive for social 'acceptability' in shopping. They rely on 'name' brands as guides to quality. Where brands do not offer a guide to the selection of goods and services, they rely on status outlets. Their desire for social 'correctness' leads to the high level of expenditures required for 'playing the games'. These individuals may not adopt crawfish until they are sanctioned by upper middle class families.

"This suggests crawfish could be marketed successfully as a 'gourmet' item sold at better restaurants or speciality food stores. Relatively high prices and very low-key advertising would be consistent with this product concept."

Lawks a mussy! What it all means, jargon aside, is that the U.S. crawfish is destined to become trendy — given a touch of class and a price tag to match, in a process similar to the eggplant, which became the aubergine, and the zucchini which, after all, is nothing more than a marrow with a good marketing manager. Some Americans already prefer to call the crawfish an *écrevisse* and emulative consumers are conned into thinking they've discovered an expensive upper class treat while down home on the swamp the Cajun scoops up yet another free meal and thanks the Lord for providence.

A similar process is occurring with the Australian yabby, although there are no marketing experts engineering the yabby's commercial debut. The yabby is becoming decidedly up-market. The yabby is coming out of the kero tin and onto the silver platters of chic city restaurants. Yabbies now appear regularly in most major fish markets, and they're gaining an international reputation. Visiting French chefs have praised them. Dr Jack Frost, while researching various aspects of the yabby, investigated its culinary value and reported:

"Quality cooking tests were undertaken by graduate Swiss chefs who discovered that the

yabby had a gourmet rating."

Yabbies have appeared live in the Parisian markets, have been shipped frozen to Sweden, and are often introduced to international celebrities visiting Australia. Miss World contestants ate yabbies in Victoria, actress Margaux Hemingway sampled them in Sydney, and **Penthouse** publisher, Bob Guccione, savoured them with wine while launching the Australian **Penthouse** magazine. The late Sir Robert Menzies, a long-serving Prime Minister of Australia, was said to be partial to the yabby as a boy, and the current Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, is rumoured to be such a fancier of the crayfish that he confiscates half the net catch of youngsters fishing the dams on his Nareen property.

Most popular food writers have paid just dues to the yabby, praising it as a delicacy. The **Adelaide Advertiser** columnist Ray Polkinghorne once wrote:

"Former Yalumba secretary Alfred Warks' personal and secret recipe for yabby mayonnaise created a sensation when introduced to the Barossa Valley Vintage festival a few years ago."

The Western Australian marron reaps most accolades and has been described as the sweetest-tasting crayfish in the world. D.D. Francois, in **A Treasury of Australian Wildlife**, says:

"Murray River 'lobsters', taken commercially on a small scale, are noted for their excellence on the dinner table. However, a well-known gourmet from Canberra has rated *C. tenuimanus* as the finest flavoured crustacean he has ever tasted."

Unfortunately, the art of yabby cooking is still quite crude. The quality of cooked yabbies in the fish markets is often atrocious; market yabbies are usually cooked 'on the spot' and the process is governed by expediency rather than culinary expertise. The yabbies are simply dumped in huge boilers and boiled.

Humorist Jim Oram offered some caustic comments on the state of yabby cooking:

"The yabby deserves . . . a better fate than as a trendy prawn. It is hauled from a muddy dam, and is then badly cooked . . . and served at a trendy Balmain dinner party. In fact,



it is usually so badly cooked that the guests, their palates ruined by an excess of inferior wine, often mistake it for something else:

" 'That was a wonderful meal. The prawns were ... ah ... unusual!'

" 'They were not prawns, as a matter of fact, they were yabbies.'

" 'Oh!'

"And so the yabby disappears from the earth without a trace, mistaken for a prawn."

Regrettably, the yabby is often used as a prawn substitute. Sometimes it's referred to as the 'poor man's prawn', and retails for about half the price of prawns. Some Chinese restaurants which advertise prawns serve yabbies; conversely, expensive restaurants which promise yabbies but are caught short have been known to deliver not-so-raw prawns.

The yabby's flavour is subtle, and so must be the cooking of it. According to the Reitz Gustametric chart of flavour intensity, the yabby rates 12 on a scale of 0-100. By comparison, eggs and trout rate 25; crabs, sausages and coffee 80-100; pepper 100. While subtle in flavour, the yabby is rich in protein. Yabby meat comprises 75-80% moisture, 15-22% protein, 1-2% ash, and less than 1% fat. The yabby's high moisture content means that if frozen and stored for a length of time it loses taste and the flesh becomes flabby.

Enthusiastic cooks, attempting to improve the yabby's flavour, often overpower it with exotic sauces. Fishing writer Ken Knox wrote:

"One of the most expensive small meals that I have ever eaten was at a small restaurant on the Murray near Swan Hill. It was actually an entrée called — from memory — 'Yabbies Billabong', or something just as touristy.

"The yabbies had been well doused in crushed garlic, and had then been rolled in bacon and grilled.

"They might have just as well been liver, brains, beef or kidney — the flavour of the yabbies had been completely drowned. The yabby's delicate flavour can be very easily lost by using too many highly-flavoured additives."

Yabby die-hards spurn the 'fancy dishes', and favour the traditional boiled yabby, but more often than not a boiled yabby is an over-boiled yabby. The universal

boiled yabby recipe is exceedingly simple, the most common advice being: "Boil for a few minutes, then serve with bread and butter." Vinegar is often recommended as an additive. So too are lemon, wine and beer.

Kate Cameron, writing in the **Australian Gourmet**, made this pertinent observation about yabby cooking:

"Overcooking is another crime many are guilty of where crayfish are concerned. These delicious morsels must be put into boiling salted water, and removed less than a minute **after they rise to the surface**. Recipes that say they must be cooked for 10 or 15 minutes should be treated with the contempt they deserve. Some crayfish take 5 minutes boiling, others 12 or more — it depends, from my experience, on the size, age and thickness of shell of the individual — but cooked in this manner I defy anyone to produce a more flavoursome crustacean ..."

Lesley Morrissey, in her comprehensive **Australian Crustacean Cookery** suggests:

"Crayfish should be boiled for a sufficient length of time to just cook or firm the flesh, but not for so long that the flesh muscle fibres become stringy or indigestible. Common sense should be used in boiling crayfish of different sizes: cooking times should be proportional to the size of the animal. The optimal time for cooking small freshwater crayfish such as yabbies, gilgies and koonacs, is only about 1 minute after the water returns to the boil, marron at legal size (125 g or 1/4 lb) about 2 minutes, larger marron and other freshwater crayfish such as the Murray River Cray (**Euastacus**) and the big Tasmanian **Astacopsis** about 3 to 4 minutes ... Please do not believe the cookbooks which tell you to boil them for about 20 minutes, for you will toughen them.

"When they have boiled for their allotted time, remove the pot from the heat source and allow them to cool in the liquid at least until it reaches room temperature. **They will continue to cook slightly**, but will not overcook, and will be kept juicy. Crayfish removed immediately from the boiling fluid will contract within the shell and dry out quickly. However, marron and yabbies eaten in the traditional bank-side manner, i.e. as soon as they have cooled sufficiently to handle, are absolutely delicious if eaten straight away. Since they will





A pair of good-size Murray Crays about to go into the pot.

not undergo the further gentle cooking in the cooling water, they may be safely given extra boiling time."

If 'boiled yabbies' sounds too pedestrian for the would-be yabby gourmand, toss in a few herbs and vegetables and call it court-bouillon. In an article in the **Sydney Morning Herald** titled 'The Social Swimmer', Sylvia Mowat Finlay explains:

*"This noble food must be taken live, and boiled in nothing less than a court-bouillon. A cup of dry white wine, a scrap of lemon rind and fennel, a few peppercorns, a small sliced carrot and onion with a couple of branches of herbs are stewed together with 2 cups of water for 10 minutes. Then, with the court-bouillon at a rapid boil, the yabbies are thrown in and the lidded pot shaken about. Ten minutes later, the yabbies are taken out.*

*"... The exquisite delicacy of their flesh may be savoured now with nothing but some buttered crusty bread and a glass of wine. Alternatively, the court-bouillon, with the heads and shells, may be boiled down to a half-cupful and incorporated in a buttery white sauce that contains a few sliced mushrooms, the yabbies chopped, and some cream makes à marvelous sauce for a tarragon-flavoured chicken."*

More basic than the basic boiled yabby is this 'recipe', a joke which circulates in country regions and occasionally surfaces in rural cookbooks and country newspaper columns:

*"Easy yabbies: Accept from a friend two large buckets of yabbies. Light the copper, then head off down to the pub for a few hours, arriving home in time for tea.*

*"Other necessary ingredients are a couple of bottles of light ale, a mate to take the blame, or alternatively a set of tractor muffs, or a thick hide. Must be tried only once a year."*

Beer is inextricably bound up with the yabby boiling ritual in the bush. Dave Kimbo, of Loxton, South Australia, describes how his friends go about the business, and relates how a chap called Zeke, of Loxton, an ace yabby catcher, and his mates have a definite yabby cooking ritual. Many stubbies of beer are required to put the yabby eater into the correct frame of

mind. An old style copper is stoked (lately they've changed to gas) to boiling point. About 1 kg (2 lb) of salt is thrown in, the water being eyed critically from behind the ever-present stubbies. The yabbies are transferred from a mesh holding basket kept in the river, and rapidly tipped into the copper when the water is boiling merrily. Watches are checked. More stubbies are consumed and after precisely 12 minutes of cooking (although others cook 'em for as little as 5 or 7 minutes) the yabbies are removed to a nearby table, empty stubbies are replenished, and the eaters tuck in.

The performance involves nothing fancy. No washing bowl. Eat the 'mustard' and all. Fresh bread for the really fussy. Zeke, following his philosophy of 'waste not, want not', will willingly demonstrate how you even find sustenance in the body: "Ya grab the body like this, rip the under-belly away, and suck the guts like this", says he, doing just that — jamming the body to his mouth, sucking viciously at the same time.

Most Australians eat only the yabby tail and, if large enough, the claws. Eating the inside of the head, chest, or thorax (the guts) is rare, but European and American crayfish connoisseurs regard this part of the crayfish as a supreme delicacy, and it's usually served as an adjunct to the meat.

Australian Aborigines also eat the yabby's head. Steve Buck, a professional shooter, supplements his income by catching yabbies. While fishing the Darling River at Wilcannia, he observed how Aborigines ate yabbies:

*"After a day on the river I used to pull in and there was always a crowd of Aborigines and their kids waiting for me. I always gave them a few kilos to split up between them. An interesting point is that one day I really got a sermon from an old woman for throwing the heads away. The Aborigines regard this as the best part of the yabby. After removing the tails and claws, they scoop out a hole in the ground and pour in the heads, covering them with hot ashes. Sometimes they dip the heads in a mixture of flour and water before putting them in the hole. After 5 minutes the heads are taken out of the hole, and a small forked stick is pushed up into the carcass and then withdrawn, together with the entrails, which are then of course eaten."*

Inside a yabby's head is a creamy mustard-coloured hepatopancreas, a digestive gland known as 'tomally', or simply called 'mustard'. Swedish and American recipes usually refer to it as the fat, or liver, and it's listed as a major flavour component. American commercial crayfish packers squeeze the fat out of the crayfish head and package it together with the meat, while amateur cray-fishers simply suck the fat out of the head. According to the Americans, the true mark of the crawfish eater is when he separates the head from the body, sticks the broken end of the head in his mouth and gives a mighty suck and a crush at the same time, thereby extracting the fat that is to be found inside the head, along with the concentrate of seasoning, that is to many the tastiest bit of the crawfish.

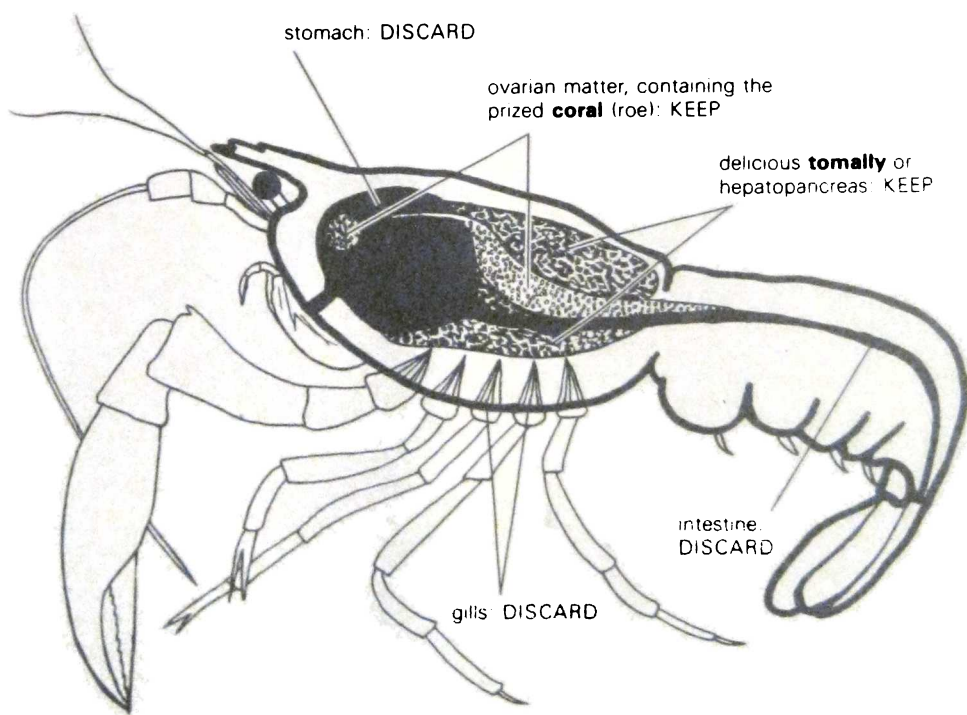
'Coral', which is known as 'Cajun caviar' in the U.S.A., is more highly prized than the fat because it is only found in a small percentage of crayfish. It is in fact the

internal egg mass and when cooked turns a bright coral-red, hence its name. It's often whisked raw into sauces as they are cooked. The Swedes also savour the roe, or external egg mass found on the underbelly of some female crayfish.

The diagram below shows what can be eaten, and what can't.

Before cooking a yabby, it should be given a bath so that it can clean itself. Yabbies are best transported in moist sacks, but they should be placed in a trough, or even the bath, filled with enough water so that they will be half submerged. This helps rid the yabby of any external muck or grit, and enables the yabby to cleanse its internal system, thus alleviating whatever muddy taste it might have had. If the yabby's shell is excessively dirty, scrubbing the shell is recommended.

To prepare a cooked yabby for eating, twist the tail and pull it away from the head gently so that the meat which



Internal view of a freshwater crayfish indicating the delicacies 'coral' and 'tomally'



extends into the head also comes away. Crush the sides of the tail shell so that the meat can be extracted. With large tough yabbies, marrons, or crays it's sometimes necessary to snip open the under-side of the tail shell with a pair of shears or scissors. Trying to break, or even cut, a large Murray Cray's shell is impossible, and bushies recommend a whack with the sharp end of a tomahawk.

When the meat is removed from the shell, slice open the top of the tail and remove the intestinal tract, or 'business' as country ladies coyly refer to it. **Yabba-ficionados** remove the tract before the shell is broken — the middle tail fin (telson) is given a swift twist and a pull. The intestine comes away with the fin. Some yabbies say this is best done when the yabby is alive, but the RSPCA disagrees. The French do away with the problem of removing the tract by keeping crayfish alive for several days and

starving them. With no food going through the system, the tract is purged.

To extract meat from the claws, twist the moveable 'nipper' and rip it away from the claw. This pulls out a flat paddle-shaped piece of tough gristle. Crack the remainder of the claw with a hammer or nutcracker and pull out the meat. Scoop out the insides of the head with a spoon. The legs and scooped-out head are often kept to decorate the final dish. Heads can be stuffed with seasoning made from the fat.

Never cook a dead yabby. Dead yabbies 'go off' rapidly. Eating an 'off' yabby could cause severe food poisoning.

Dead yabbies, and the yabby scraps, should be dug into the garden as a fertiliser, or used as chook food.

When buying cooked yabbies from a market, check that the colour is a nice bright red. Avoid cooked yabbies with black blotches, or discolouring. Avoid obviously



Dick Earl and Ed Riley Jr settle down to enjoy a feast of marron and beer.

mangled yabbies — chances are they were dead when cooked. A freshly cooked yabby tail should be stiff and spring back when gently raised. Floppy saggy yabbies are stale yabbies.

To determine the number of yabbies needed for a meal, calculate that only a quarter of the yabby's total weight will reach the table. Edible meat constitutes only 28 per cent of the yabby's total body weight. A marron gives much better dinner value — its tail constitutes approximately 41 per cent of its body weight.

Finally, kill yabbies with kindness. There have been recent rumbles from animal protection societies about methods of slaughtering crustaceans. The English RSPCA prosecuted a sixteen-year-old girl for putting prawns on a hot stove and watching them "jump about in agony". Adolf Hitler signed three laws governing the humane treatment of seafood — one dated 14 January 1936 commanded:

*"Crabs, lobsters, and other crustaceans are to be killed by throwing them into rapidly boiling water. When feasible this should be done individually."*

The Australian vice-president of the World League for Protection of Animals said:

*"Stunning for inertia is attempted in some instances, but in general the method of plunging the creature into boiling water is followed and accepted, or that of placing it on a hot griddle plate."*

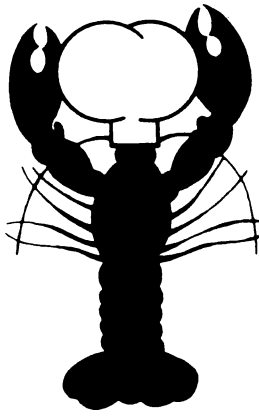
Crustacean cooking authority Lesley Morrissy writes:

*"It is not cruel to kill [crayfish] by boiling. Death is always, but never quite, instantaneous. There are several things that can be done to ensure that their few seconds of apparent agony are not prolonged. They should be plunged head first into the liquid, which should be boiling rapidly, with high heat continually applied so that boiling continues. Do not put so many crayfish in the pot together that there is insufficient liquid to completely surround each one — nor in a batch so large that the boiling is quenched more than momentarily."*

*"It is not true that bringing crayfish slowly to the boil anaesthetises them — it merely prolongs the painful death process. However our tests show that if the crayfish are put into the*

*refrigerator for a few hours, and then into the freezer for about two minutes, their nervous system slows and they become sluggish, appearing not to suffer at all when dropped into the boiling pot . . . Fortunately this method also produces a better culinary product than other techniques."*

If a recipe stipulates that the yabby should be cooked from its raw, or 'green' state rather than using it boiled, then the yabby must be stabbed to death. Right between the eyes is best for quick slaughter; better still if the blade is then brought down and through the yabby, cutting the wretch in half. For the squeamish, the London Humane Society is promoting an expensive electrical apparatus which stuns the crayfish.



## THE RECIPES

### Bisque

The most popular and traditional crayfish preparation, apart from boiled crayfish, is bisque, or soup. The word bisque, originally French, has been bastardised somewhat, as J.W. Thudichum explained in his 1895 treatise on culinary art, *The Spirit of Cookery*:

*"Bisque or crayfish soup, anglice, also called bisk and cullis, is an interesting product of magic art.*

*"... The French expression bisque signified a soup made from crayfish, and was not applied to any other culinary preparation without special qualification. It is, therefore, a sufficient definition, and the expression 'bisque d'écrevisse' is perhaps a tautology."*

### Crayfish Bisque à la Thudichum

Thudichum provides a superb recipe for bisque, and adds interesting variations. His writing style is long-winded, but his recipe is worth the reading:

To produce *bisque*, from four to six crayfish of the larger size are required — of the

*smaller variety, about a dozen — for each person. After having killed them by skewering, remove the gut from each of them by holding the fish in the left hand, and with the right thumb and forefinger pulling out the central paddle of the tail; to this the gut will adhere. Put the crayfish in a stewpan, add a mirepoix of finely-sliced roots and a bouquet of herbs, pepper, and pimento as tincture, 2 oz [60 g] of butter, a glassful of Madeira or Marsala wine, cover with standard broth, and add sufficient thereof to make the fish swim. Boil while stirring until the crayfish are all red. Let cool, and pick out the crayfish while running the broth into a saucepan. Remove the meat from the tails, and cut it into dice and set it aside. Pound all the carapaces, tail-sheaths, and claws included, together with six anchovies, some bread fried in butter, and some wine or spirit to dissolve the colour; add the liquid in which they have been boiled, and boil again while stirring. Boil (to fifty crayfish) 4 oz [125 g] of rice, until it forms a thin paste; add this to the boiled pounded carapaces, insure the sufficient liquidity of the mixture by the addition of broth if necessary, and pass through a tammy [strainer]. Add a piece of butter to the purée and keep it hot in the water-bath. Brown some thin slices or dice of bread in butter, and place them, together with the dice of the meat of the tails, in the soup-tureen, and pour the soup over them.*

## Consideration of Proposed Amendments and Practical Variations

The more we study the art of cookery the greater becomes our admiration of the skill and ingenuity which have been applied to the production of the most characteristic results from the given materials. But we also find amendments proposed to well-established recipes, which merely exhibit the want of information of the authors. Whether in the case of bisque to make it clear or thick is a matter of choice, but whether the thickening should be effected by a consommé of fried bread in veal-broth or by boiled rice is immaterial. Some recipes are distinctly retrograde, and, compromising the fundamental idea, do not, in fact, yield a true bisque. In one of these the carapaces are not directed to be pounded, but left unused, while the meat of the tails, constituting the most delicate morsels, is pounded, and subsequently mostly left on the tammy. As the writer of this recipe loses sight of the colouring matter contained in the carapaces, which, being itself a fatty matter, unites with the butter during the cooking after comminution, particularly with the aid of a little spirit or wine, it is not surprising that he prescribes that the butter in which the crayfish were done should be coloured with red lobster spawn. This trouble, even when feasible, is totally unnecessary. The extraction of the pounded carapaces yields not only the red colour of the fat, which makes the bisque so nice to look at, but also the grand flavour which constitutes so great an attraction to the gustatory organs. On the other hand, the pounding of fleshy tails, while probably imparting some flavour to the soup, is destructive of the meat, and thereby of the visible proof of the genuineness of the bisque, for the tails are a kind of evidence which cannot be imitated, not only of the nature, but also of the richness of the preparation.

In some parts of Germany forcemeat and marrow-balls, or quenelles, are poached into the soup besides the sliced tails and fried bread. The pounding of the carapaces is done in the presence of butter, and they are comminuted to a pulp. This pulp is now set to fry until the butter is coloured red and begins to rise, and then only the original broth in which the crayfish were boiled is added. Some boil the crayfish in mere salt water, and throw this away, and liquefy the roasted crayfish butter with new stock. They now boil, and remove the coloured butter with a

spoon during boiling, in order not to lose any in the carapace débris during straining. The soup, after passing the tammy, may be allowed to stand until it is clear and cold; the butter may be skimmed off, and the liquid decanted from the deposit. If the latter be now clarified with white of egg, clear bisque will result, and may be served, with the red butter restored to it, with the sliced tail-meat and fried bread immersed. It is the analogue of clear turtle, and a great deal more tasty than that, whereas the form above given, and to which we attribute the better quality, corresponds to thick turtle. However, crayfish soup differs from turtle and most other technically accomplished soups in this, that whether it be clear or thick, it always contains the red or orange coloured crayfish butter, in which the greater part of its characteristic flavour is concentrated. To bind and emulge this butter by suspension in a starchy medium may be suitable in the case of the thick bisque, but for the clear the binding material, whether rice or fried bread, would have to be omitted.

**Compound Bisque** is a bisque as above described, augmented by additions, particularly when the number of crayfish is by itself insufficient to afford material for the necessary volume. Mussels and quenelles of whiting blend very well with the crayfish tails.

Bisque is an ancient soup and often celebrated in verse. It is reputed to be an aphrodisiac. One of the most spirited allusions to it is by Meslin de Saint-Gelais, the chaplain to Francis I, King of France, in a poem addressed to an unidentified lady:

When one is feverish  
dear lady, there is a certain risk  
that for a certain time  
one won't be playing brisque\*

And to dine poorly  
and have no bisque,  
Just to contemplate such a tiresome  
risk  
puts me in a pique.

\*Brisque is a game with matrimonial overtones.

## Ecrevisse à la Bordelaise

(Reprinted from *Western Australian Crayfish Cookery*, by Lesley Morrissy)

**Serves 2**

**Preparation and cooking time 25 minutes**

---

2 or 3 carrots

---

2 stalks celery

---

2 onions

---

150 g (5 oz) butter

---

4 sprigs parsley

---

1 bay leaf

---

1 kg (2 lb) live freshwater crayfish

---

1½ cups white wine

---

1 tablespoon tomato paste

---

4 tablespoons cream

---

salt, black pepper and cayenne pepper for seasoning

---

Chop the vegetables into fine julienne strips. Melt the butter in a large saucepan, add the vegetables and the herbs and simmer until the vegetables are soft. Add the crayfish and cook over a high heat, stirring constantly until the shells are red. Add the wine and tomato paste and boil for 4—5 minutes. Add the cream. Turn off the heat and season to taste.

### Variations and serving notes:

Serve in bowls from a big tureen, accompanied by saffron rice and a green salad. Crayfish can be flamed in a little cognac before being added to the vegetables. Large marron and Murray Crays should be chopped. Use yabbies whole. The dish can be prepared a day beforehand and gently reheated.

## Neunhoffer Ecrevisses

(Reprinted from *Les Ecrevisses Françaises* by Marc André)

---

about 50 yabbies, cooked, washed and with intestines removed

---

1 L (2 pt) dry white wine

---

2—3 glasses water

---

3 shallots, thickly sliced

---

2 big onions, thickly sliced

---

2 garlic cloves, thickly sliced

---

3 carrots, shredded

---

1 leek, the white part only

---

bouquet garni (parsley, bay leaf, tarragon, celery, thyme, savoury)

---

1 clove

---

6—8 grains ground pepper

---

3 teaspoons salt

---

1 small glass cognac

---

2 lumps sugar

---

1 teaspoon fresh butter

---

parsley for garnish

---

Pour the wine and the water into a large pot. Add the shallots, onions, garlic, carrots, leek, bouquet garni, clove, pepper and salt. Boil for 30 minutes on a high flame. Add the yabbies and bring to the boil again.

Remove from the flame and add the cognac, sugar and butter and leave for 30 minutes.

Remove the yabbies from the pot, drain them, and arrange them on plates. Garnish with the parsley.



## Crawfish Etouffée

(Recipe by Mrs J. Burton Angelle, the wife of Louisiana's Wildlife and Fisheries Commission director.)

**Serves 5—6**

---

3 large onions

---

30 g (1 oz) margarine

---

crawfish fat

---

1.25 kg (2½ lb) crawfish tails

---

salt and pepper to taste

---

hot water

---

1 bunch parsley, finely chopped

---

5—6 servings hot rice

---

Sauté the onions in the margarine for 15—20 minutes until soft. Add the crawfish fat and cook over a low heat, stirring constantly, until the fat comes to the top. Add the tails and season to taste. Add just enough hot water to the étouffée for desired consistency. Simmer for 20 minutes. Add the parsley.

Serve over steaming hot rice.

## Crawfish Dip

(Recipe by Mrs J. Burton Angelle)

**Serves 15**

---

1 kg (2 lb) crawfish tails

---

2 onions, finely chopped

---

30 g (1 oz) margarine

---

crawfish fat

---

1 large can mushroom soup

---

salt and pepper to taste

---

Grind the crawfish tails. Sauté the onions in the margarine until soft. Add the ground crawfish tails and cook for about 15 minutes.

Add the fat and the mushroom soup, cook for another 5—10 minutes. Season to taste.

## Stuffed Yabby Heads

---

60 yabby heads

---

2 medium onions

---

1 large bell pepper

---

30 yabby tails

---

¼ cup cooking oil

---

½ cup flour

---

yabby fat

---

about ¾ cup water

---

2 teaspoons salt

---

1½ teaspoons red pepper

---

1½ cups breadcrumbs

---

¼ cup finely chopped parsley

---

¼ cup chopped shallots

---

30 g (1 oz) butter

---

extra flour

---

Remove the eyes and wash the heads of the yabbies well. Mince the onions and the bell pepper together. Mince the yabby tails in a separate dish. Make a golden brown roux with the oil and flour. Add the ground onions and bell pepper and cook until soft. Add the ground yabby tails and fat and simmer for 15 minutes.

Add the water, salt and red pepper. Add the breadcrumbs, chopped parsley and shallots and butter. Fill each head with the stuffing, roll in the extra flour and bake for 15 minutes in a moderate oven.

## Jambalaya

---

60 g (2 oz) butter

---

2 tablespoons flour

---

6 onions, finely chopped

---

yabby fat

---

1.5 kg (3 lb) yabby tails

---

1 bunch parsley, chopped

---

few shallots, chopped

---

salt, red pepper, black pepper to taste

---

3 cups cooked rice

---

Melt the butter in a frying pan and add the flour. Brown slightly. Add the onions. Simmer until the onions are soft, then add the yabby fat. Simmer for a few more minutes, then add the tails, parsley, shallots and seasoning. Cook for 15 minutes altogether.

Add cooked rice when ready to serve.

## Swedish Yabbies

(Recipe provided by Swedish Institute, Stockholm)

**Serves 3—4**

---

3 L (6 pt) water

---

lots of dill, preferably the crowns

---

$\frac{1}{3}$  cup coarse salt

---

1 lump sugar

---

1 kg (2 lb) yabbies

---

fresh dill for garnish

---

Combine the water, dill, salt and sugar in a large pot. Cover and bring to the boil. Check the yabbies to make sure all are alive, and rinse them under cold running water. Drop the yabbies into the briskly boiling dill water and cover at once. Bring the water to the boil again and cook the yabbies for 7 minutes.

Remove the pot from the heat and allow the water to cool.

Put the pot, still containing the water and the yabbies, in the refrigerator overnight.

When ready to serve, pour off the cooking water and remove the soggy dill. Arrange the yabbies attractively on a large platter and garnish with crowns of fresh dill.

Serve with hot buttered toast, Swedish spiced caraway cheese, and well chilled aquavit, schnapps or beer.

## Yabby Crêpes

### Crêpes

Makes about 20 crêpes

---

*1½ cups flour*

---

*1 teaspoon sugar*

---

*$\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon salt*

---

*3 eggs*

---

*milk*

---

*2 tablespoons butter, melted*

---

*cooking oil*

---

Put the flour, sugar and salt in a bowl. Add the eggs and mix together. Add milk gradually, beating well. Add the melted butter. Let the batter stand for about 1 hour.

Heat a small crêpe pan, and brush with cooking oil. Pour in 1½–2 tablespoons of batter. Tilt the pan to cover the entire bottom. When the crêpe is golden turn it over and cook the other side for about 1½ minutes.

### Rich white sauce

---

*4 tablespoons butter*

---

*6 tablespoons flour*

---

*2 cups chicken broth or stock*

---

*$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt*

---

*$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon white pepper*

---

*$\frac{1}{2}$  cup cream*

---

Melt the butter in a saucepan and add the flour. Cook over a low heat, stirring continually to make an even paste. Remove from the heat and stir in the chicken broth or stock. Return to the heat and stir until boiling. Cook for several minutes.

Season with the salt and pepper. Add the cream and stir in well, but don't allow the sauce to reach the boil. Put the sauce in a double boiler and cook over simmering water for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

### Yabby filling

---

*60 g (2 oz) butter*

---

*3 garlic cloves, crushed*

---

*1 cup chopped shallots*

---

*500 g (1 lb) yabby tails*

---

*1½ cups white sauce*

---

*salt and white pepper for seasoning*

---

Melt the butter in a large skillet, add the garlic, shallots and yabby tails. Sauté for about 4 minutes and then add 1½ cups of the prepared white sauce. Season with the salt and pepper and cook for another 5 minutes.

To assemble: take a crêpe, put a spoonful of yabby filling on the crêpe, turn two sides towards the centre and lay the crêpe seam-side-down in a ramekin. Put 2 or 3 crêpes in a small ramekin. Cover with some more of the sauce and sprinkle with parmesan cheese. Bake in a 170°C (350°F) oven for 10 minutes.

## Marron Polish-style

(Adapted from *Australian Crustacean Cookery*, by Lesley Morrissey)

**Serves 8 as entrée, 4 as main course**  
**Preparation and cooking time 15 minutes**

---

*16 legal-size marron, cooked or raw, shelled*

---

*2 tablespoons butter, heated*

---

*salt to taste*

---

*200 ml (1/2 pt) sour cream*

---

*1 heaped tablespoon fresh breadcrumbs*

---

*1 heaped tablespoon fresh dill, chopped or 1 teaspoon dried dill*

---

Toss the whole tails in the heated butter and cook for 30 seconds if already cooked, 2 minutes if raw. Salt lightly, add the sour cream, breadcrumbs and dill. Simmer, tightly covered, for another 10 minutes. If desired, the marron tomally [fat] can be stirred into the sauce a few minutes before serving, to give additional flavour.

### **Serving notes and variations:**

The Poles cook and serve this dish with their freshwater crayfish whole and unshelled (they are much smaller than marron), but it must be messy for guests to shell crayfish covered in cream. It is easier to serve just the shelled tails in the cream and to use the claws (and any coral) for garnish. Serve with boiled potatoes and a tossed green salad.

A rather similar dish is made in Hungary, but the freshwater crayfish are first boiled in water flavoured with cumin and then they are shelled; butter-cooked tomatoes and paprika are added to the sour cream mixture.

A few champignons or fresh field mushrooms, cooked with the marron, add a pleasant flavour. The marron can be replaced with 20–25 large yabbies.

## Chilean Yabbies

(This recipe, by Frank Margan, was published in *Australian Gourmet*)

**Serves 4 as an entrée**

---

*1 tablespoon butter*

---

*250 g (1/2 lb) small mushrooms, sliced*

---

*500 g (1 lb) yabbies*

---

*1 small can peeled tomatoes*

---

*salt and pepper to taste*

---

*1 cup dry white wine*

---

*500 ml (1 pt) sour cream*

---

*4 cannelloni pastas*

---

*parmesan cheese*

---

*paprika*

---

Melt the butter on moderate heat, add the mushrooms and stir until just cooked. Add the yabbies, tomatoes, salt and pepper, wine and sour cream and keep stirring until thick and warmed through. Don't overcook.

Fill the cannelloni pastas with the mixture and place them in an ovenproof flat dish. If there's any sauce left over, pour it over the pastas. Sprinkle parmesan cheese over the pastas, covering thinly. Sprinkle the pastas with a few pinches of paprika for colour and bake in a hot oven, 215°C (425°F), for 15 minutes.

## Yabby Cocktail

---

*boiling salted water*

---

*24 medium-sized yabbies*

---

*1 cup tomato sauce*

---

*1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce*

---

*1/4 cup lemon juice*

---

*1/2 teaspoon salt*

---

*pinch cayenne pepper*

---

*2 tablespoons cream*

---

*lettuce leaves*

---

*lemon segments*

---

*brown bread and butter*

---

Cook the yabbies in the boiling salted water. Drain, cool and shell them. Combine the sauces, lemon juice, salt, pepper and cream and chill.

To assemble: place a crisp lettuce leaf on each serving dish, place some yabbies on the leaf and spoon the chilled sauce over them.

Serve with lemon segments and bread and butter.

## Yabby Stew

This recipe was published in Rosemary Sinclair's **Cooking and Looking at Bendemeer**. The former Miss Australia said she compiled the book from recipes of the people of Bendemeer, New South Wales, the home of the Sinclair family. She says, while the title sounds very ordinary, the dish is simply delicious. To make this entrée you will need a bucketful of the little beasts — but the effort of catching, washing, cooking and shelling will be well worth it!

### Serves 4 as an entrée

---

*1 tablespoon butter*

---

*2 cups milk*

---

*500 g (1 lb) fresh yabbies, boiled in salted water and shelled*

---

*salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste*

---

*1 dessertspoon good dry sherry*

---

*paprika*

---

*1/2 cup thick cream*

---

*hot French bread*

---

Melt the butter in a heavy saucepan and let it simmer until it's golden brown. In the meantime, heat the milk to boiling point. Add the yabby meat to the browned butter and cook gently for a few minutes. Add the hot milk and bring the lot to boiling point. Season to taste with the salt and pepper and add the dry sherry. Sprinkle liberally with paprika and then gradually stir in the cream.

Serve at once with hot French bread.

## Murray River Crayfish with Breadcrumbs

This recipe was selected by Margaret Fulton from entries in the National Fish Recipe Competition held in conjunction with the First Australian Fisheries Exposition in 1976. The recipe was later published in *Commercial Fish of Australia*.

**Serves 4**

**Preparation time 50 minutes**

---

*2–4 big crayfish, cooked (cook as for yabbies)*

---

*30 g (1 oz) butter*

---

*1 shallot, finely chopped*

---

*250 mL (1½ pt) milk*

---

*30 g (1 oz) flour*

---

*anchovy sauce*

---

*salt and pepper to taste*

---

*1 egg, well-beaten*

---

*breadcrumbs*

---

*extra butter*

---

Remove the meat from the shells and cut into small pieces. Melt the butter in a saucepan and cook the chopped shallot till lightly browned. In the meantime, heat the milk to boiling point. Add the flour to the shallots and then slowly add the hot milk. Add the cray meat, anchovy sauce and seasoning. Boil gently for 10 minutes and then allow to cool.

Add the well-beaten egg. Place the mixture in scallop dishes, sprinkle with the breadcrumbs and dabs of the extra butter and then bake for 20 minutes.

Serve hot.

## Crayfish Avocado

**Serves 4**

---

*2 ripe avocado pears*

---

*¼ cup garlic-flavoured French dressing*

---

*12 medium-sized yabbies, cooked*

---

*lettuce leaves, washed*

---

Cut the avocado pears in half, scoop out all the flesh and mash with a wooden spoon. Add the French dressing and mash to a smooth pulp, then spoon back into the avocado skins. Peel the yabbies and de-vein the tails, wash and drain. Arrange the yabby tails on top of the avocado halves.

Serve on lettuce leaves.

## Yabby Butter

Use for sandwich spreads, canapés, hard-boiled eggs, decoration of cold dishes; for enrichment of crayfish sauces and bisques, and canned and frozen crayfish soups.

Crayfish butters are made with the cooked debris, such as legs, chests, eggs, and green matter of the crayfish.

The red shells colour the butter a creamy rose, and both shell and bits of flesh give a lovely flavour to the mixture. You can also make crayfish butter with the meat alone, and colour the butter with a bit of tomato paste.

Traditionally, the shells and meat are placed in a large marble mortar, and are pounded into a puree with a heavy wooden pestle. Then they are pounded with the butter so every bit is thoroughly mixed together. Finally the whole mass is forced through a fine-meshed drum sieve to remove all minute pieces of shell. This long and arduous process needs no further explanation. You just pound; the result is exquisite. An excellent butter may be made in an electric blender in a fraction of the time.

### For about 2/3 cup

---

*1 cup cooked crayfish debris or 1/2 cup cooked crayfish meat and 1 1/2 tablespoons tomato paste*

---

*125 g (4 oz) hot melted butter*

---

*salt and white pepper for seasoning*

---

Chop the debris or meat into small pieces, or put it through a meat grinder.

Fill the electric blender jar with hot water to heat it thoroughly.

Empty and dry quickly. Then add the crayfish. Immediately pour in the hot melted butter, cover, and blend at top speed. The butter will cream into a stiff paste in a few seconds. Pour the mixture into a saucepan, heat until the butter has warmed and

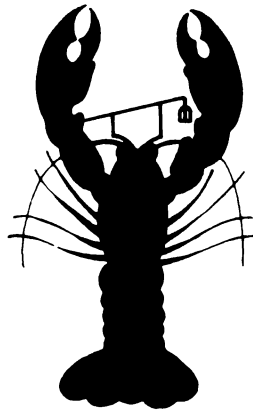
melted. Blend again. Repeat, if you feel it necessary.

Rub through a very fine sieve, extracting as much butter and crayfish meat as possible. As the butter cools and partially congeals, beat it with a wooden spoon.

Season to taste with salt and pepper.

**Note:** May be frozen.

**Second pressing:** To extract the remaining butter and flavour from the debris left in the sieve, steep the debris in an equal amount of almost simmering water for 5 minutes in a saucepan over very low heat. Strain, and chill. The congealed butter on top of the liquid may be used for sauce enrichments. The liquid itself may serve as the basis for a fish stock.



## THE YABBY AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION, MYSTIFICATION AND EDUCATION

Most people, when contemplating a yabby, would see just that — a yabby. But others gazing at this odd crustacean form would perhaps divine the complex mysteries of the universe. Such yabby mystics regard the nineteenth-century English zoologist Professor T.H. Huxley as their guru. Professor Huxley immortalised these crustaceans in his classic study, **The Crayfish**. The book proved so popular that it created a cult of crayfish fanciers who used the creature to expound on all the philosophies of life and the religious awe of **being**. What developed was a sort of nineteenth-century Zen and the Art of Yabby Watching.

Professor Huxley's book was published in 1880 but well before that he let it be known he was, to use today's jargon, 'heavily into' crayfish. He wrote to Jeffrey Parker in 1876:

*"Mollusks are far more interesting, bugs sweeter — while the dinner crayfish hath no parallel for intense and absorbing interest in the three kingdoms of nature."*

Professor Huxley's mentor was the German naturalist Roesal von Rosenhof, who, in 1755, wrote:

*"Common and lowly as most may think the crayfish, it is yet so full of wonders that the*

*greatest naturalist may be puzzled to give a clear account of it."*

Huxley cited von Rosenhof in the preface to his own tome and, in the wake of the book's publication, other crayfish visionaries emerged.

Harvey Carlisle produced a treatise on crayfish philosophy, writing:

*"I should like to get beyond mere philosophy, as Bishop Berkeley did when he had only tar-water for his philosophical text, into the region of divinity. This may be possible.*

*" 'In this mass of nature,' says Sir Thomas Browne, 'there is a set of things' — why should not the crayfish be one of them? — 'that carry in their front, though not in capital letters, yet in stereography and short characters, something of divinity, which to wiser reasons serve as luminaries in the abyss of knowledge, and to judicious beliefs as scales and roundels to mount the pinnacles and highest pieces of divinity. The severe schools shall never laugh me out of the philosophy of Hermes, that this visible world is but a picture of the invisible, wherein, as in a portrait, things are not truly, but in equivocal shapes, and as they counterfeit some more real substance in that invisible fabric'."*

**Phew! Carlisle concluded:**

*"Therefore the philosophy of crayfishes.*



like all other philosophy when fairly followed out, seems to me to transcend the material universe, to carry the human mind into regions in which physical science does not find itself, to point to the cloud which hides the Creator from our view, and to indicate an almighty hand of mystery behind the cloud which is the maker and doer of all."

In 1897 Thomas R.R. Stebbing exposed the "astounding ignorance of men" in relation to knowledge of the freshwater crayfish and warned:

*"There are still deplorable depths of darkness to be dealt with . . . Not seldom they confound in their muddled ideas the crayfish of the river with the crawfish of the ocean . . .*

*"Really, if the general reader and ordinary seeker of Knowledge would bring his powerful mind to bear on the subject, he would find that there is in the study as much variety of interest, as much facile amusement and as much perplexing difficulty, as much opportunity for observation and experiment, as much inciting to hunting and collection as there is in any other fashionable province of exertion. To be more explicit, it can compete on favourable terms with*

*circle-squaring, butterfly-catching, the ascent of lofty mountains, the search for the north pole, the tabulation of authentic ghosts, the viewing of the nebulae, the counting of asteroids and the prospecting of stars so distant that we cannot tell whether they are still in existence "*

Down Under, a more down-to-earth populace declined to ponder the metaphysics of the yabby. There was a brief spark of interest in the 1920s when Melbourne's **Punch** became mystified by the yabby, particularly the yabby's ability to appear abundantly in outback waterholes. **Punch** floated the theory that the yabby was a unique example of 'spontaneous regeneration', that the yabby was miraculously created out of nothing. Outback pundits scorned the notion and scotched the development of national yabby awe.

Professor Huxley's original treatise also promoted the crayfish into the hallowed halls of academia. Crayfish aquariums became standard nature study aids in schools, the dissection of crayfish was common in London colleges, and nature books recommended the capture and taming of crayfish.



Schoolchildren holding a yabby race in the classroom.

A renaissance in crayfish studies has occurred in Victorian and South Australian schools. In Victoria, a programme investigating the use of animals in schools was instigated in the Department of Science at Burwood State College. In 1977—78 the research was extended to evaluating the potential of Australian native animals for classroom use. The yabby emerged at the top of the class, and a booklet entitled **Yabbies** was published in 1979. The booklet introduced teachers to the educational power of the yabby and set a series of classroom study exercises. The booklet's introduction states:

*"Teachers looking for animals that are ideal for classroom study need look no further than the common yabbies (or indeed any of the 'freshwater crayfish' found throughout Australia).*

*"In terms of classroom use the yabbies:*

- *are easily obtained*
- *are relatively easy to keep alive*
- *can survive out of water for short periods*
- *can be handled by the children*
- *will reproduce in captivity*
- *exhibit a range of behaviour patterns*
- *exhibit many easily observable biological characteristics*
- *evoke instant interest in children at all levels of primary school."*

Some country schools send pupils on yabby hunting expeditions. Alexandrina State School declared 1979 the 'International Year of the Yabby' and compiled a year-book of pupils' experiences with yabbies including reports on catching, racing and arithmetical problems which were couched in terms of yabbies.

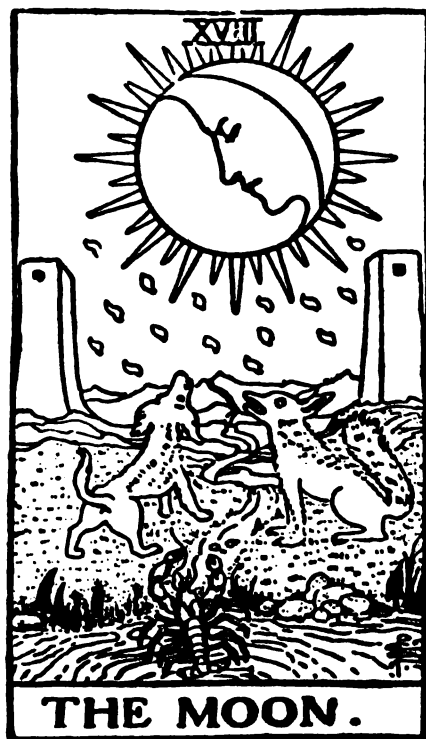
Medieval Central Europeans believed crayfish possessed powerful magical qualities.

The crayfish appears in the tarot, specifically in the major arcana, key 18 — the Moon. The crayfish is depicted emerging out of a pool (representing the great deep of mind-stuff out of which emerges physical manifestation), and symbolises the early stages of conscious unfoldment.

Crayfish were once prescribed medicinally. In fact, the Greek Dioscorides first catalogued crayfish healing powers in the first century A.D. Dioscorides' theories were translated into English in 1655:

*"The ashes of burnt Crevises or river Crabs, to ye quantitie of twoe spoonefulls, with one spoonefull of ye roote Gentian. & being drانck in wine for three dayes together, doth manifestly help such as are bitten of a mad dogge. And with sod Hony they doe lenifie the chaps which are in ye feet. and those which are in the seate, and ye Perniones, & ye Carcinomata. Being beaten when they are raw and drانck with Asses milk they help the bitings of Serpents & the stroakes of the Phalangii & Scorpions. But being sod, and eaten with their broth, they are good for such as are in consumption, & such as have swallowed a Sea Hare. But being beaten together with Ocimum. & layd unto them, they kill Scorpions."*

Europeans powdered crayfish claws to make a broth which was prescribed as an emollient. Medicinally, the most used part of the crayfish was the gastroliths — the calciferous nodules which build up in a yabby's



The crayfish is traditionally part of the eighteenth card of the tarot, the moon.

body and are eventually used to harden the new exoskeleton, or skin. Gastroliths were called 'crab's eyes' or 'crab's stones', and according to French naturalist Marc André:

*"They were used in ancient pharmacopiae in the making of the hyacinthe, temporing powders etc. The most valued of these came from Hungary and Astrakanh. Crayfish existed in such enormous quantities in the Volga that they were left to rot in large heaps on the river banks in order to supply the Russian apothecaries with gastroliths.*

*"In the sixteenth century the Old Man Gesner indicated that in its pulverised and thin or watery state, crab's eyes constituted both a fortifier of the heart and a product to whiten the teeth."*

Professor Huxley wrote:

*"Crab's eyes were collected in vast numbers, and sold for medicinal purposes as a remedy against the stone, among other diseases.*



*Their real utility, inasmuch as they consist almost entirely of carbonate of lime, with a little phosphate of lime and animal matter, is much the same as that of chalk, or carbonate of magnesium."*

English folklore suggested crayfish repelled snakes. In 1908 a **Country Life** magazine correspondent, replying to a query as to how to get rid of snakes infesting a house, wrote:

*"Take ten river crayfish, and pound them up with a few onions."*

But the correspondent failed to mention what to do with the resultant concoction. Smear it across the snake's path, feed it to the snake, or rub it on its tail?

Oddly, Dioscorides' first century claim that crayfish could cure cancer is now being echoed in South Australian research. A study, 'The cytotoxic effect of haemocytcs from [the yabby] on tumour cells of vertebrates' (roughly translated: Will yabby blood cells kill tumour cells?), was published in 1974 and the summary, in part, stated:

*"Haemocytcs [from the yabby] have been found to be cytotoxic for various tumour cell lines."*

Other experiments are being conducted in South Australia on the immunology of yabbies to certain bacteria and infections, and in Canberra on the major protein, haemocyanin, in yabby's blood. In 1974 the **Adelaide Advertiser** reported that Adelaide University yabby research suggested the yabby's nervous system could be developed as an antidote to barbiturate poisoning, or drug overdoses. The university later reported that before this research could be finalised, the researcher 'shot through'.

Naturally, a creature possessing the magical, mystical and medicinal qualities of the crayfish is bound to be honoured in heraldry and adopted as a clan totem.

Several American Indian tribes claimed the crayfish as their totem animal. The Chakchiuma Indians of the Mississippi Valley were named after the crayfish. Catlin's 1836 publication **Indians II** claimed that the 'crawfish band' was an Indian clan which spoke a Choctaw-Chickasaw dialect, lived on the Yazoo River in Mississippi.

believed they originated from crawfish, and had dwelt "underground, and used to come up out of the mud". According to Choctaw legend this crayfish clan once managed to smoke some crayfish out of their holes. The clan treated the crayfish gently and taught them their language, to walk on two legs, and to cut their toenails and pull the hair out of their bodies. Having thus domesticated them and transformed them into men, they were adopted into the tribe.

The Houmas Indians of Louisiana admired the crawfish for its courage, and adopted it as a battle symbol. Today the Louisiana crawfish is the symbol of the Cajuns — adaptable, humorous and courageous. In the early 1970s a South Louisiana bumper sticker proclaiming 'Cajun Power' displayed a clenched fist on a field of crawfish rampant.

An Aboriginal yabby clan existed in South Australia. The clan, the Weiro or Wereo, belonged to the Kumite class of the Buandik or Bungandity tribe. This tribe

once lived in an extensive area covering 7400 square miles (11 800 km<sup>2</sup>), from the West Grampians and Casterton in Victoria to Mt Gambier, Penola and Robe in South Australia.

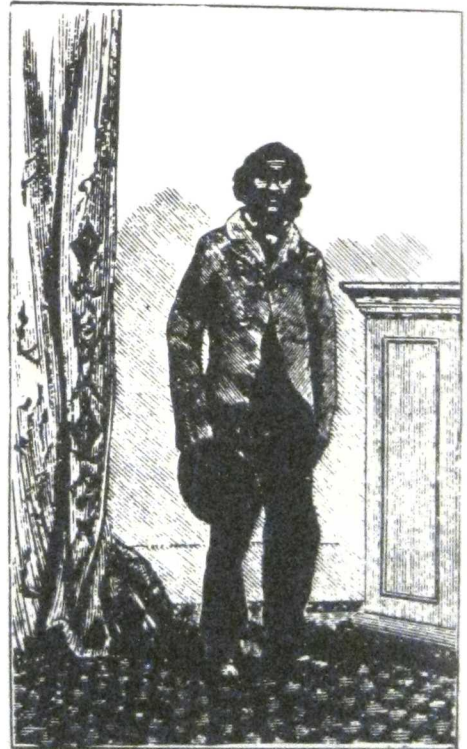
Both the Weiro clan and the American crawfish tribes carved or painted their totem figure on personal possessions, and used the figures as battle insignias. Such markings signifying relationship and tribe are similar to European coats of arms, and several European coats of arms carry crayfish.

French crayfish featured on the coats of arms of the Thiard de Bourgogne, d'Alescamps, and Anthouard de Vraincourt clans, or families. The ancient English family, the Attwaters, regarded the crayfish as their totem. Fox Davies' **Heraldry** describes the Attwater coat of arms as:

*"Barry wavy [undulating bars] of six argent [silver] and gules [red]. 3 crevices [crayfish], two and one or."*

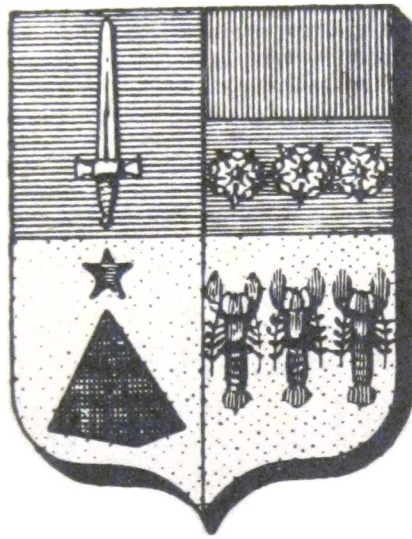


Queen Caroline, a member of the Aboriginal yabby clan.



Patchuerimen (Jemmy MacIntyre), another member of the yabby clan.





This coat of arms from the French nobility features three crayfish as part of its design.

Cardinal Wolsey's good friend, Dr William Attwater, a Bishop of Lincoln, adapted the Attwaters' crayfish coat of arms into his own.

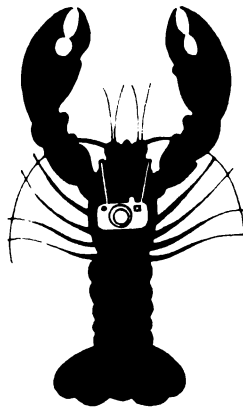
European warriors, or knights, not only marched and fought under crayfish banners, but also adopted the crayfish's interlocking armour into their clothing design. Such dress design was called 'cray's beard'. Rabelais observed that the nuns of the abbey of Theleme wore slippers made of red or purple velvet which were cut up and sewn like a crayfish tail.

Alas, yabby heraldry is virtually non-existent in Australia. The yabby is sometimes adopted as a symbol by sporting groups — for example, the Yarra Valley Hockey Club in Victoria.

But the yabby heraldry situation could be on the improve. Humorist Phillip Adams wrote:

*"I'm going to need a coat of arms — I think I'll have a rampant wombat with yabbies couchant."*

**Perhaps he'll start a trend?**



## THE YABBY AND THE TOURIST

Some people, it has been said, would walk a mile for a camel. But how far would people walk for a yabby? And why? To watch it, catch it, eat it or race it?

Catching yabbies has definite tourist potential. People travel miles in the hope of netting the creatures; to what lengths would they go if a catch was guaranteed? To the Mallee and back, according to the Dimboola Shire Council, which actively promotes the delights of yabby catching in the Mallee lakes. In fact, when the Victorian government legislated to restrict the gear which could be used by amateur yabbiers, the Mallee tourist magnates clacked their opposition. One Dimboola councilman, Syd Drendel, saw the law in terms of a conspiracy. He asked was it a "feeling of jealousy over the influx of tourists" which had been responsible for the restrictions on amateur yabbiers. Councillor Drendel recalls that one year, the yabbies in Lake Albacutya attracted huge crowds of summer tourists, so much so that the Dimboola Shire Council's Committee of Management over the lake recovered eight tonnes of rubbish weekly.

The delights of marron catching and eating are promoted in Western Australian tourist brochures, and the growth of winter camping along the Murray River (on the New

South Wales-Victoria border) has been attributed to the increased popularity of the Murray Cray.

Then again, some country councils are banking on yabbies to repel unwanted tourists. Nude bathers, for example, would not be welcome in Castlemaine, Victoria. Skinny-dippers contemplating the delights of basking naked in the central Victorian goldfields district were warned that the waters were well stocked with yabbies. This information was relayed by the Castlemaine Council to the Victorian government when its then Minister for Sports and Recreation, Brian 'Norm' Dixon, canvassed councils for their view on setting aside special areas for nude bathers.

Tourists who come fully clothed are welcomed in Castlemaine, and some of the town's nudist-nipping wild yabbies are sacrificed, appearing cooked and ready-to-eat in the well-promoted Bullboar and Yabby Restaurant, located in a picturesque old hotel.

People do travel to savour the delights of the chef-prepared yabby, and yabbies are the star attraction on the menus of many of the new 'provincial' tourist restaurants.

Swan Hill's Riverboat Restaurant is renowned for its yabby dishes. Proprietor



The Yabbie, a small fresh-water crayfish peculiar to Australia, has a taste certain to delight gourmets the world over. For years every boy has bragged about his yabbie-catching ability which consisted of dangling a piece of meal on a string into almost any waterway. The yabbie's magnificent flavour is a perfect base for this unique Australian bisque and is one of the most popular soups sought after by gourmets at my Riverboat Restaurant.

Directions: Empty contents into saucepan, slowly add equal quantity of milk while heating and mix thoroughly. Bring to boil and simmer for a short time.

Ingredients: Tomato Paste (25% soluble), Chicken Yabbie Meat, Fiedgel 154, Milk Powder, Monosodium Glutamate, Dried Mashed Onions, Lower Extract, Salt, Curry Salt, Paprika, Green Bell, Cayenne, Pepper, White Pepper.

Canning code EX 293

*P. Beattie*

**NET 432g or 15¼oz.**

© 1973

Peter Beattie's Riverboat Restaurant is on the Paddle Steamer 'Gem' on the Murray River and is part of Swan Hill's Pioneer Settlement.

**CANNED FOR RIVERBOAT INVESTMENTS PTY. LTD.  
SWAN HILL, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA.**

**Yabbie Bisque**



**AUSTRALIA NET 432g or 15¼oz.**

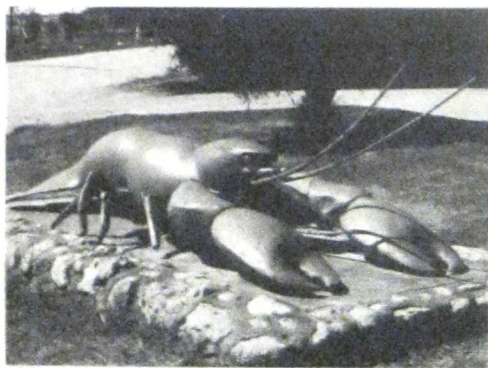
One of Australia's export products — yabby bisque straight from the Murray River.

Peter Beattie says the yabbies are by far the most popular dish served in his restaurant, and he features some unusual dishes — for example, yabby pancakes. Cans of yabby bisque and chowder are on sale as souvenirs.

If it's yabby souvenirs the tourist seeks, then Yabby City must be regarded as the mecca. Yabby City offers Australia's first range of yabby souvenirs — yabby tea-towels, car stickers, spoons, serviette rings, sew-on patches, hats, medallions, post cards, the works. Yabby City is in Clayton, a small holiday town near the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia. Clayton is hard to find but, once there, Yabby City is easily detected — a monstrous red concrete yabby dominates the town.

The brain behind Yabby City and its concrete yabby is Henry Jones, a former professional yabby catcher. Jones started Yabby City in 1974, hoping to attract 'weekenders' from nearby Adelaide. Now, more than 80 per cent of his clientele are tourists, and European travellers are particularly attracted to the place. Yabby City is a combined museum, restaurant and local wine cellar. Tanks of live yabbies are on display in the restaurant. The museum displays river memorabilia, and the menu promises dishes such as Yabby Cocktail Natural, Fried Yabby Tails with Garlic Butter, Yabby Billabong, Yabbies Baked in Cheese Sauce, Lake Alexandrina Yabby Salad, and Clayton Curried Yabbies.

Jones has big plans for Yabby City. He wants to build a much larger concrete yabby. He wants to set up a commercial yabby farm, and tours of the farm will be sold as a tourist attraction. He plans to set up picnic areas and specially stocked ponds where children can catch their own yabbies for lunch. A similar venture is planned for Western Australia by Kimberley (Kim) Standsby, a former cattle breeder turned marron farmer. Standsby hopes to supplement the marron farm income with a tavern-restaurant complex where tourists can drink and eat fresh marron from the farm.



'The Biggest Yabby in Australia' pays tribute to the freshwater crayfish outside the Yabby City Restaurant on the shores of Lake Alexandrina at Clayton, South Australia.

A Melburnian, Jack Sudden, who describes himself as a "retired jack of all trades and the ace yabbier from way back" has an ambitious plan for a yabby zoo. He hopes to stock the zoo with a complete collection of Australian freshwater crayfish, yabby catching ponds, a farm and a yabby restaurant, and yabby memorabilia, whatever that may be.

The leader in the race for the yabby tourist dollar is indisputably Queensland's bi-annual World Crayfish Derby held during the ('goanna be great') Winton (birthplace of Qantas and home of "Waltzing Matilda") Outback Festival. Yabby races are popular in many western New South Wales and Queensland towns, but the World Crayfish Derby is the Melbourne Cup of yabby races, and taken quite seriously because of the \$1000 first prize. A series of preliminaries — the Ringer's Roundabout, the 1080 Handicap and the Shearers' Run — lead up to the main event. Ten yabbies, caught in

the nearby river and kept in a net for the occasion, are auctioned before the Derby. Prices for a racing yabby are steep — in 1979 the cheapest yabby cost \$230, the dearest \$290.

After the race the entire field is cooked and awarded as the prize to the owner of the second-placed yabby. The Derby's promoters reckon this prize is "the dearest gourmet meal in the world". This claim might prove correct because the 1979 field sold for \$2590.

After the auction, a **Best Bites** parody of a form guide lists the crayfish and their owners. Each yabby is given a 'Clawtron' rating — the guide explains:

*"The crayfish strength to speed ratio is measured in Clawtrons (Cts). An exact approximation value, subject to seasonal change, has been determined to the nearest Clawtron by the experienced handicapper and is listed beside each crayfish as per programme. A Clawtron is the time taken to sever the average ringlock and barb (or six plain and barb) fence wire from top to bottom, divided by the length of the nipper. The standard crayfish has a Clawtron (Ct) count of 55.4 Ct. All units are expressed in whole numbers to avoid confusion."*

The history and present form of each crayfish is analysed for the benefit of prospective punters. Some of the 1979 contenders were:

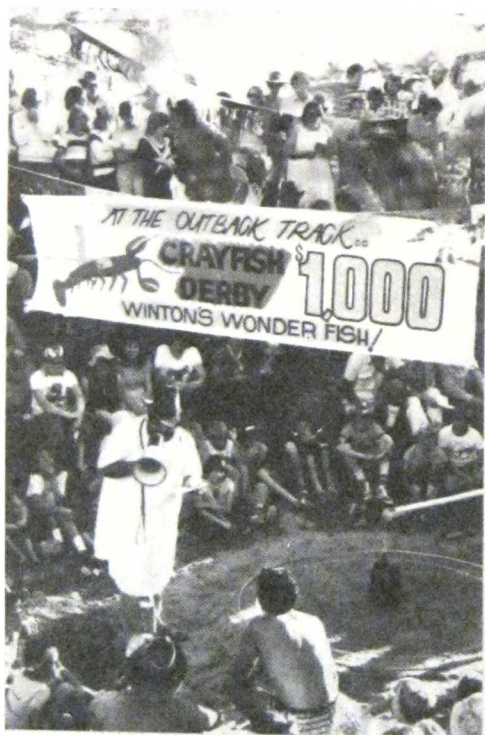
#### **HI FINANTS —**

**Trainer: Des Bennet —**

**By Galloping Inflation out of Stagnation.**

**Clawtron rating 63**

*A greenback coloured entrant in Mint Condition which has attracted a good deal of interest. First came to the trainer's attention while attempting to gnaw its way into a local bank vault. Subsequent events and observations left the trainer in no doubt as to the reasons for this forced entry. Des learned that Hi Finants was a refugee from the Treasury and suspected he thrived on a steady diet of dough. This was fed and the Champ's deposits were constantly chequed for any withdrawal symptoms. Early suspicions were further confirmed when Hi Finants went missing during the week of a Federal Loan Council meeting. Before the State Treasurers even began lobbying, the Champ's insatiable appetite had left nothing for them to take home. Not satisfied with that, this entrant*



Things take on a serious tone at the Winton Crayfish Derby as the first race is about to get under way.



raced on from Canberra to Nullabor to cheque out the Great Australian 'Bite' — only to confirm his trainer's suspicions — it had nothing on the Champ! Some of the locals reckon this fellow is chained up at the bank door now and it's a risky business going in unless you're carrying plenty of green feed. Des is not telling all the secrets since he learned the key to success with this runner, but he is expected to issue a further statement prior to post time. We have been told, however, that no change will be given to the training programme. In most broker's camps runner and trainer are considered a safe combination and a first rate investment. At least as safe as any (creek) bank.

#### **HAMMERSLEY HUSTLER —**

**Trainer: Noel Kavanagh —**

**By Court Short out of Order.**

**Clawtron rating 61**

An import from the state of excitement! Eucalyptus honey and fast crayfish, this bloke knows his onions. Not for him a muddy nook in the bull-rush bank of a sluggish bore drain. No, it's the kudos and bright lights, the glamour and reward of success in the sport of kings and queens. His trainer calls him the quarter horse of the crayfish world and those who have seen him in action, the long loping strides and big-hearted finish, swear on their mother-in-law's cookbook that he will do the job. It's a pie in the sky for this hombre and when you see his sweeping antenna get first tickle at the winning post, don't say I didn't tell you. No lies are told of the World Crayfish Derby. The truth suffices — be in it!

#### **WINNIE THE LOO —**

**Trainer: Bente Moller —**

**By Frantic Search out of Paper.**

**Clawtron rating 59**

Although they've been trying to keep the lid on this great little performer, the news has finally leaked out. Winnie, a regular runner, has featured in his last five starts. Winnie's family has given his connections every cause to be flushed with success with their recent efforts. His half brother, *Sigh Of Relief*, has run consistently recently while his sister, *Pants Of Desire*, has wiped all before her. With the big race looming up closer, Winnie's training programme has been intensified. He's handling the increased laps around the bowl and has acclimatised to the local cisterns of running. To build up his Clawtron count Winnie is chomping chain after chain of his training track. Camp has had to be

relocated a number of times. His trainer hopes to lax off his runs just prior to the big event. Those in the know expect a strong plunge as Winnie is known to come with a rush from behind. He's a real goer!!

#### **ROTORUA RODENT —**

**Trainer: Frances Medlin —**

**By Sulphur Supreme out of A-Scent.**

**Clawtron rating 63**

A fiery, yellow fish weighted at 60 Clawtrons. He 'ranked highly' on the New Zealand handicap lists last season. His sire 'Supreme Sulphur' (Stinkie to his huge band of followers) was one of the first fish to race in New Zealand. Rumour has it that Stinkie created one of the deepest geysers in the North Island, trying to evade capture. He has passed this stamina on to his son. His connections decided on a start for the Rodent after getting wind of the stakes during the Spring Carnival in Melbourne. His trainer Fran Medlin reports she has had some difficulty in getting him acclimatised. To prevent him being homesick he is boxed in a mud bath made of 50 parts bulldust, two parts water, a pinch of ammonia and a pair of her husband's work socks, all brought to the boil on a stove well out the back. Sure to figure prominently if the wind's the wrong way.

Rotorua (63 Cts) won the 1979 Derby by half an antenna.

Immediately prior to the start of the Derby, the racing yabbies are placed in stables around a circular sand racing track. Stables are designed to complement the yabby's race name: Winnie the Loo was of course stabled in a brown toilet and Hi Finants was held at bay in a green money-bag. The entrants are examined for fitness and then placed in the 'starting gates'. The gates are a red bottomless bucket placed in the centre of the track. A flashing red light signals the all clear, a button is pressed, the bucket raised electronically and the race is on, crayfish crawling toward the outside winning edge of the ring. All the usual race day betting facilities are available and the betting take is big.

Crayfish races are also popular in the U.S.A. Indianapolis might host the Indy 500, but Carolina has the Crawfish 300. Crayfish racing is a main feature of the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival. Breaux Bridge is the centre of the Cajun (or Acadian) crawfish

industry in Louisiana. The town is called "Crawfish Capital of the World" and festival co-ordinator Anna Belle Dupuis-Hoffman Krewitz explains that it was the train backing into the station that first earned the town the name of Crawfish Capital: therefore, Breaux Bridge came rightly by its title, officially designated by the Louisiana legislature in 1958.

Since the first Crawfish Festival in 1960, the delicacy has spread through all of Acadia. The telephone directory, French bread wrappers, and the town seal, etc. carry the crawfish emblem.

One hundred thousand tourists visit the festival and consume more than 100 tonnes of crawfish. As well as the race, the festival features crawfish eating contests — one winner put away 15 kg (33 lb) of crawfish! — crawfish peeling contests, crawfish cook-ins, and a crawfish Queen contest. The festival's parades are headed by Monsieur L'Écrevisse, a giant mechanical crayfish, and hosted by Les Écrevettes, a group of teenage girls chosen by contest.

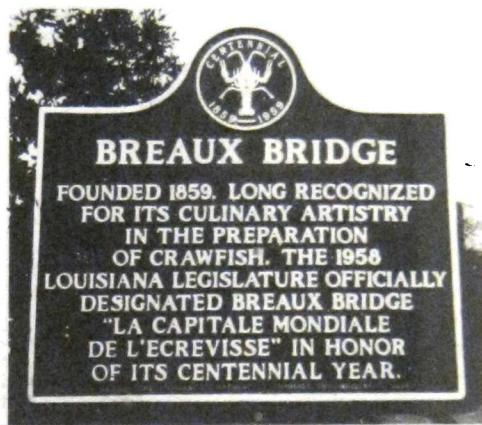
The Swedes hold an annual crayfish season which is well attended by tourists eager to sample the crayfish feasts. Mats Rehnberg, in his listing of **Swedish Holidays and Annual Festivals**, writes:

*"As the summer turns and begins to draw away and the warm evenings get shorter, crayfish time comes around. In private gardens and verandahs, in rural inns and urban restaurants brightly coloured lights gleam in the dusk and fireworks burst and glitter, all announcing the progress of crayfish feasts.*

*"The reason why this gastronomic ceremony has become a seasonal event is a law which was introduced at the beginning of the century prescribing that crayfish may not be fished before August 7. Thus from this day onwards for several weeks crayfish are eaten with due ceremony and tradition, and the custom has long since developed into a sort of seasonal milestone. Crayfish are boiled with dill and eaten cold, invariably accompanied by Swedish schnapps and beer."*

Reuters correspondent Lloyd Timberlake filed a more detailed and humorous report:

*"Stockholm, August 1979. It's crayfish season in Sweden, which explains the presence*



Not so much an idle pursuit as a way of life for the inhabitants of Breaux Bridge, Louisiana.

*each morning of many red-eyed people carefully sipping medicinal beers in Stockholm's cafes.*

*"Depending on who is talking, the three-week season is either the high point of the gastronomical year, or much ado about almost nothing. Some cynics say it is both.*

*"... The 18th century Swedish scientist who established modern biological classifying systems, Carl von Linné, labelled the crayfish an insect, an outrage his fellow countrymen have either forgotten or forgiven.*

*"About August 8, most of Sweden begins eating crayfish by the bushel, an easy feat because only the tiny claws and tails are consumed; a big specimen providing only a mouthful of meat. Enthusiasts also tackle each shell with a loud slurp, to suck out the dill-flavoured juices.*

*"The season's start is endowed with as much pomp and tradition as Britain's 'glorious twelfth' of August, when the first grouse are rushed from the northern moors to London's best restaurants. In Sweden the first crayfish cannot be trapped until 5.30 p.m. on the 8th, and cannot be sold in stores and restaurants until midnight. A few shops and eating houses stay open to be among the first providers.*

*"If snails are merely vehicles for garlic sauce, crayfish are an excuse for alcohol.*

*"The typical crayfish party consists of lots of paper lanterns and paper decorations, a large table on which rests a silver dish heaped high with the tiny creatures, surrounded by bottles of*

beer and vodka and lots of people bent on a last blow-out before summer fades.

"Drinking songs accompany each round.

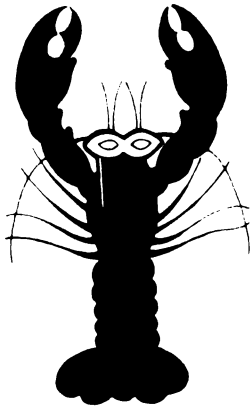
"Some diners insist that a shot of vodka must be downed with each claw, a custom which puts the party's big eaters under the table before they can make pigs of themselves.

"Embarrassingly for the Swedes, about 90 per cent of the crayfish they eat come from Turkey . . . and these can be had for about \$A7 a kilogramme [\$A3.50 a lb]. Fresh Swedish crayfish can cost up to \$A30 a kilo [\$A15 a lb]. An editorial cartoon . . . showed a fishmonger taking his Swedish specimens from a steel bank vault . . .

"The [closed] season does not apply to imported Turkish crayfish, but Swedes seem to eat them only in their home season. 'I have never been able to find out why. Some say it is a mystical religious thing, others tradition, others just habit,' said [one observer].

"There is a way of cheating: Finland begins its [crayfish] season earlier than Sweden. Each year as the Finnish season starts an armada of yachts leaves Stockholm harbour, sailing straight and true north-east for Helsinki. A few days later, their captains' and crews' appetites and thirsts satisfied, the boats sail back. But few come straight home. In fact, many are weaving erratically."

Australia doesn't have such organised crayfish madness. But you can bet that somewhere beyond the black billabong a beery-eyed captain of the Australian yabby tourism industry is drawing up the blueprints for a National Yabby Day with accompanying feasting and drinking.



## THE MARINE PRETENDER TO THE YABBY TITLE

The marine 'yabby' is not a yabby at all, but a mere shrimp-like creature scientifically known as *Callinassa australiensis*. It lives in tidal flats and estuaries from northern Queensland to Victoria.

It's rather awkward looking, pale pinkish-white in colour, with a flattened-out body. Author Bill Scott wrote that it: "... looks as if someone has stepped on it." It grows to about 8 cm (3 in) long, has one small claw and another much larger claw which is totally out of proportion to its total size, and can give quite a nasty nip. Thus engaged, the claw sometimes must be broken off to disengage the creature. It's adept at burrowing and can reverse direction by somersaulting.

Its only saving grace is that it's excellent fishing bait. Whiting sometimes come out of the water at low tide and slither around on the mud trying to catch them. Bream will literally stand on their heads to extract marine yabbies from their burrows. Fishermen used to dig it out of its burrow but now they use a 'yabby pump', a plunger with a suction device. Professional bait dealers use power pumps to drive water under the sand, causing the burrow to collapse and the creature to float to the surface.

Some people call it a shrimp, but strictly speaking it's not. Other popular names are: Bass yabby (Victoria), ghost nipper (because of its pale translucent appearance), ghost yabby, pink nipper, pink yabby, nipper, and one-armed bandit.

Oddly enough, some people have seen fit to write about the nipper. The following story, historically relevant, appeared in Ian Gall's *Fishing For the Fun of It*:

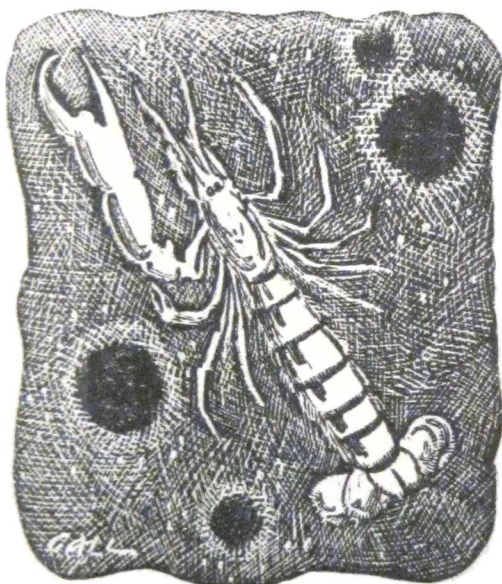
### *The Discovery of Yabbies*

*The discovery of yabbies was perhaps one of the greatest things that ever happened to Moreton Bay and its fishermen and I do believe it was a Queensland discovery. I have never ceased to be amazed at how little people know about this discovery — the how, when, and where of it.*

*My first introduction was in one of the early fishing competitions, forerunners of the many which now take place every weekend at almost every resort on Queensland's east coast. It was at an A.F.A. competition. A.F.A. was even then a long-established club and certainly the first in this state. The rivals were from Tweed Heads and referred to generally as the Tweed boys. I remember I was a ring-in for A.F.A. and I remember this caused some dissatisfaction to some members, and, let's admit it, rightly so.*

But there was much greater consternation when the Tweed boys arrived, for amongst them they possessed some great big glass jars filled with wriggling pink and white things called yabbies. This was about 1927. Believe it or not we knew nothing of these creatures, either by name or appearance, though most of us had been fishing solidly for some twenty years at least. Much to our disgrace we had all thought those myriads of built-up holes on the banks belonged to soldier crabs. No one, it seems, had ever thought of digging, and naturally there were no yabby pumps.

Might I add that the Tweed boys, with their jars of yabbies, wiped the floor with us, the humbled competitors for A.F.A. But that started



the hunt by various impressed and curious people. We were down at the Pin next week-end and made for the bank near the trees at the south end of Pandanus. This bank, since then, must be the most pumped yabby bank in Moreton Bay as it has supplied thousands upon thousands of fishermen with their bait over almost forty years. The yabbies are as plentiful there now as ever, maybe more plentiful; there are fewer fish — except stingarees — to feed on them.

I don't know by what method the Tweed boys acquired their first yabbies but I'll guarantee it was no harder than ours. We would drop onto all fours and scoop out a 2 ft [60 cm] diameter hole. Of course it would cave in with soppy sand

as we dug, but having cleared the hole of hard sand you felt around the edges for a cavity. By moving your hand continuously and vigorously it was possible to force your whole arm along and if in luck your fingers would make contact with a precious yabby, and precious it was. You didn't always make contact, in fact the odds were less than even.

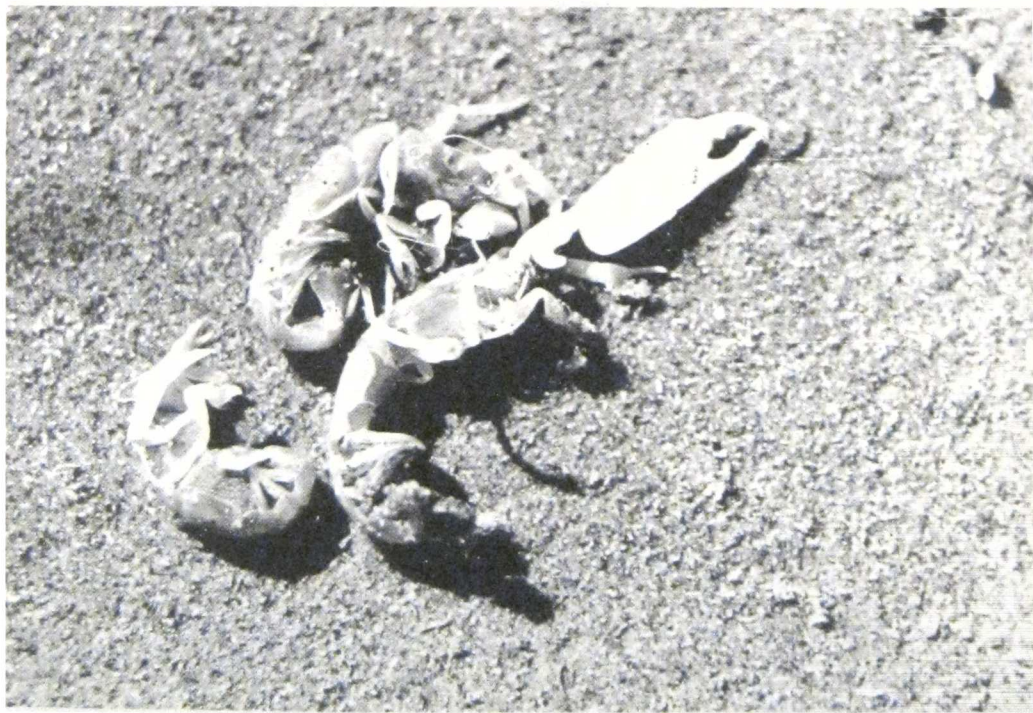
Having a yabby between your fingers was only half of the exercise. Withdrawing your arm was quite a fight against suction and the weight of sand. 'Puddling' was another way but we felt we did better by our own method. A strenuous half hour's digging may put ten yabbies in your bait tin. You didn't take a bucket ashore, there was no need. Next development was to take a shovel ashore. This, at least, made quicker work of digging the initial hole and made getting up the burrows easier and quicker.

Then came wonderful news from my friend, Bunny Jones. He'd been holidaying at Narrow Neck and one day, while riding his bike over the Jubilee Bridge, saw a man on the flats at the east end jamming a piece of downpipe into the sand. He noted also that the man stooped down and picked up yabbies and dropped them in a bait tin. It was not long before the fishing shops had the old galvanised pumps on their counters. They comprised 2 ft 6 in [76 cm] of down-pipe, an 8 in [20 cm] length of water-pipe slipped through for a handle and two thumb holes on a flat plate across the top. A very useful machine it was, too, but as the galvanising wore off at the mouth end, rust set in smartly and soon the edges started to crumble and you needed a new pump.

About that time stainless steel came on the market. It took a lot of fixing but soon we had a beautiful shining pump in stainless steel, smooth and easier digging. I think this mysterious pump found its way out of Evans Deakin's. But even that was doomed to be discarded. Almost before we had got the feel of the stainless steel job we had a new-fangled brass pump forced upon us. It was this way!

The late Fred Bright, dentist and well known sportsman and clubman, and I had been fishing together for a long while. We fished Moreton a lot in the early days of 'Mirimar' club, we even fished for Mirimar in the South Queensland Championships and I don't think we let the side down. One holiday we admitted a third party to our trip, Wallis Cadell. I have fished with him for many years now and still do. One day we were digging yabbies on the





Above: Using a yabby pump to collect marine yabbies.

Below: Highly prized as bait by coastal fishermen, the marine yabby is most easily caught on estuarine sand flats. The yabby with one large claw is a male.

Bedroom banks in Tippler's Passage and needed some big yabbies for fishing the surf the next day.

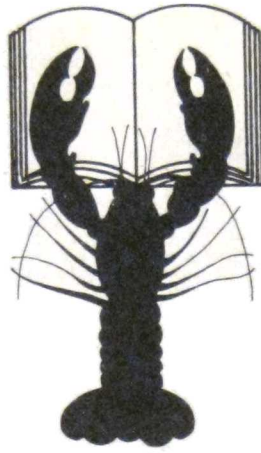
Just on the west side of the mangrove point at the south end of Pandanus Island is the home ground of some very big all-white yabbies almost twice the size of normal ones. They have claws on them like mud crabs. Freddie was on the pump. I was picking up and Cadell was the one who gropes in the hole for the loose ones. There was a yell and Wal withdrew his hand with one of the big yabbies fastened with the point of one nipper dug in beside his fingernail. He was in the wrong company to get sympathy but that didn't discourage his performing. Shamed back into the job he continued in his allotted role but after another dozen or so extractions there was another yelp and some horrible swear words and there, dangling from his finger, was yet another bottler with the same old fingernail grip. From then on he jacked up on going down the holes so I had to take over, with my fingers far more precious than those of an accountant. Next trip Cadell presented the trio with a brand new Alvey brass pump so no more going down the holes.

About yabbies, have you noticed that there are left and right-handed yabbies? and that the left-handed run about five-to-one against right-handers. By right-hander I mean those with the big claw on the right.

I have been chatting to Alan Gynther, one of Australia's top beach and estuary men of a few years back and now a successful swimming coach with a young family of champions. We set the discovery of yabbies at somewhere around 1927. Tweed may have been earlier than that but north of Brisbane, later, much later. That's not really long ago.

More amazing still is the fact that when the Queensland Angling Team went down to Lake's Entrance [Victoria] to fish the Australian Championships, in 1953, yabbies were unknown to the locals at the Entrance, yet their banks abounded with them. The beauty of yabbies is, and few people know it, that if you release a colony in a suitable place, more often than not they will survive and in a relatively short space of time populate the whole area.

By now fishing clubs were booming and sea worms, prawns, mullet gut and fowl gut gave way to the ubiquitous yabby, a beautiful bait to use if there ever was one.



## TALES FROM BEYOND THE BURROW

When people unexpectedly confront a yabby — or vice versa — the result is usually an encounter of the absurd kind. Particularly if the yabby is confronted away from its normal habitat, beyond its burrow or waterhole. Then again, when people venture out of their territories and into the yabby's, strange things can also happen. This collection of incidents illustrates the syndrome. Some tales are obviously 'tall stories', others are suspect, and a few defy description.

*This is a story told to me by my grandfather:*

*"While camped in a tent at Boundary Bend on the River Murray, I put some stringers in the river in the hope of catching a big Murray Cod. (A stringer is a thin sapling stick with a line attached. In the event of catching a big cod, the stringer flexes, therefore less chance of a broken line.) I put a big yabby on the line as bait, and tied a bullock bell to the top of the stringer. I went to bed and settled down for the night. About four o'clock the next morning the bell started to ring-ring-ring. I lit the lantern and rushed down to get a big cod for breakfast, but the poor old yabby had gotten sick of his job, and come out of the river, climbed up the stringer, and rang the bell."*

Tammy Withers, Casterton, Victoria

*Many years ago, when my two eldest children were young, my late husband, Alex Gurney, then political cartoonist on the **Herald**, later originator of the **Bluey and Curley** strip, used to take the children to Albert Park Lake. At that time there were many yabbies there. He would have a flat-bottomed boat, take along some string and meat and a kerosene tin, and the kids would have a ball pulling in the yabbies. They were, however, too scared to touch them and any suggestion to cook and eat them was quite out of the question. Alex discovered that Alf, the man who serviced our poor old car, just loved yabbies. Consequently all yabbies caught were taken to Alf. However, one day things became complicated. A half kerosene tin full of yabbies was delivered to Alf. He was very busy, thanked the kids, and the tin was left. But he forgot all about them — forgot to cover the tin, forgot to take them home.*

*Next morning the yabbies were missing, but turned up at the most unexpected moments and places in the cars which had been left in the garage overnight — in the motors, on the windscreens, and in the upholstery. Imagine driving along a busy road to discover a yabby crawling up your leg or in front of you on the windscreen.*

*It almost ruined the yabby business.*

June Gurney, Brighton, Victoria



One of the chaps at work (G.M.H.) lives at Mitcham and he told me a yabby in his garage ate half a table-tennis ball, so if they're hungry they can go vegetarian.

Jack Colbert, South Melbourne, Victoria

My worst experience during the great Goondiwindi floods of the early 1920s was when the biggest crayfish I'd ever seen grabbed me by the toe. I screamed until the local butcher, struggling with a basket of meat on his rounds, removed it.

Toby Garland, in the **Australian Women's Weekly**, 1979

I grew up with yabbies. We lived on the Darling River at Menindee and many a time we went yabbing, armed with old grape dip tins as yabby pots, baited with a shank of mutton mostly. On one occasion myself, plus boyfriend, my sisters and their boyfriends were up on Tallyawalka Creek having a barbecue when somebody discovered a couple of yabby nets in the water. They were hauled out and their contents confiscated and put in a pot for lunch. Since we were all yabby fans we couldn't let the side down, so we put a present in each net and put them back in the water. We've often wondered at the owner's reaction when he pulled up his nets and found no yabbies, but instead a large cold bottle of West End beer in each net.

I've seen sugar bags full of cooked yabbies consumed in the bar and on the verandah of the Quondong Hotel, the half-way house between Broken Hill and Menindee. On the same hotel's bar I've also seen the famous trick of hypnotising the yabby and leaving him standing on his head on the bar.

Sandy Maiden, Karumba, North Queensland

Once when fishing from the banks of the Murray River near Yarrawonga I was becoming concerned that my bait supply was getting low. My thoughts about this were interrupted by a noise in the grass nearby. On looking down I saw a large yabby making its way down the bank with a frog in one claw. The frog was just what I needed to supplement my bait supply,

so I picked up the yabby and gently relieved him of the frog. After putting the frog in my bait tin I noticed that the yabby had not moved from where I had put him. He was fixed on the spot and staring at me with a look that almost pleaded for his frog back. Not wishing to return the frog, but still feeling sorry for the yabby, I poured a small amount of rum from my flask into a bottle top and placed this in front of the yabby as a peace offering. Much to my surprise he took a sniff, then proceeded to drink the rum by dipping his claws into it and then transferring the drops to his mouth. When the bottle top was empty he backed off and made his way down the bank. After this surprising incident I got back to my fishing. However, a short time later I felt a tug on my trouser leg and looked down. There was the same yabby, tugging at my trouser leg with one claw, and offering another frog in the other.

A.J. Lee, West Lakes Shore, South Australia

In a letter published in **Wildlife Magazine**, March 1949, V.S. Leeder wrote:

"Fishing on the Morwell River up above Boolarook in the holidays. I was surprised to find, first, the line seeming to be fast on a snag or something in the water, and then, one of the largest river crayfishes I have ever seen came up the line hand over hand, down the rod, and then tried to drag the whole thing into the water.

"Investigating the line I found it to be fast to an equally large female crayfish, carrying a mass of eggs. She was properly caught and the other crayfish (could it have been her husband?) was pulling the whole show into the water, apparently to free her.

"At other times we have lost lines in the river, and we thought eels had taken them: I rather feel now that we should have blamed the yabbies. Is this unusual?"

The magazine's editor, P. Crosbie Morrison, replied:

"It is not merely unusual, it is fantastic, and warrants further enquiry into the extent to which a mated pair of yabbies remain in double harness."

The children from one very poor family which lived in our area back in my school days, regularly supplemented their diet with yabbies and often had to catch their evening meal on the way home from school or go hungry.

One afternoon on the way home from school several of us stopped at the creek and after pulling out weeds and overturning rocks we captured a large yabby.

An unsuspecting classmate happened along a few minutes later, and we told him that if he shut his eyes and held out his hand we would give him a surprise.

He got a surprise all right, for within two seconds he was running up the road yelling his head off, with arm outstretched and the yabby firmly attached to one finger.

B. McKenzie, Trentham, Victoria

My nephew once stayed with me and he was always after yabbies. During his stay with me there were yabbies crawling out of their tins everywhere. When I made his bed, I found them there. When I moved his shoes I found them in there too.

Joy Stewart, Bruthen, Victoria

During the war I was in the land army and spent many years at Renmark and Berri in South Australia, where the yabby is part of the way of life. My dearly beloved brother-in-law died of wounds in Italy and I remember his two sad-faced little daughters coming to visit us. How could we take the puzzlement and sadness from their little faces? Ah, yabbing. What a success it was. The daughters were quickly changed into two wet, muddy, excited happy little girls, with one minute yabby in a treacle tin of water.

Not so long ago I spent a lovely weekend at a mohair goat seminar on Chowella Station near Renmark. During that seminar bags of yabbies were caught and cooked for supper one evening. The cook was a shearers' cook, an excellent cook but you do not press shearers' cooks for 'inside information'. They become testy and you might find out more than you wish to know. I'll never forget the taste of those yabbies, nor the pleasantness of the yabby party. I will always remember one of the lecturers on mohair, a most serious-minded chap, smiling seraphically at me, waving a large yabby to emphasise the point, repeating the mohair

motto: "Now remember, there's no hair like mohair." When people talk about acts of God, they usually mean earthquakes and disasters. They forget God also made yabbies.

Vonery Helberg, Bunbury, Western Australia

I remember meeting a guy at Monash University who committed his entire life to the study of freshwater crustacea. I will never forget meeting that freshwater crustacean bloke. He was a real lucky gin character — as he reached to shake my hand he dropped a dozen text books all over the floor and kept dropping and redropping them for the next few minutes. He was a lovable, awkward, earnest American chap and he committed suicide about six months later.

Phillip Adams, Melbourne, Victoria

I remember in our sober moments, which weren't many, that at a particular dam which we frequented for yabbies (they were always home) they would march out in single file and walk slowly into our waiting net and not a word was spoken. True.

John Jancrak, St Albans, Victoria

This story is true and you could probably get a newspaper clipping to back up the story from Whyalla in South Australia. It started when me and my friend Coil went out on my motorbike yabbing at a place called Yabby Dam. Going there, we had to make sure there were no police cars about because my motorbike was not registered, had no lights etc., besides which none of us were old enough to even have a licence. Anyway, it didn't take long to get there because the bike was fairly fast. We chucked out about half a dozen bits of handline with meat attached. When a yabby was on the meat I would stir up the water so it couldn't see me, then I'd slowly pull it close and grab the yabby and toss it on the bank. My friend Coil was too scared to do this and his idea was to get a piece of tin about 3 ft [1 m] long, get it behind the yabby and slowly draw it onto the muddy bank. After an hour we had close to one hundred yabbies. We went to a friend's house, showed them off, then went to my house, dug a hole, put plastic in it and put the yabbies in, and filled it with water.

Next morning I checked the pond. All the yabbies were gone. As I looked around the yard I could see a few scattered around. Some were dead, some were dying, some were being eaten by ants. I saved what few I could. At about 4 o'clock Coil raced over with a newspaper. He pointed out a story near the centre of the front page. During the night one of our yabbies had walked about two blocks away into someone else's yard. Come morning, the lady of the house walked out and screamed. Then she rang the **Whyalla News** and told them about the mysterious yabby. No one knew how it could have gotten there. I was going to tell the lady but Coil warned me that I could get done because I didn't have a permit to keep yabbies. I didn't know if it was true but I didn't say anything then.

Richard Elliot, somewhere in South Australia

Yabbing is seventh heaven to me. Many years ago while at Dederang, Victoria, a friend and I spent the morning yabbing. A fine catch it was too, half a kero tin full. A fire was started, the yabbies cooked to perfection, and subsequently devoured. On our arrival back at the house we were met by an irate husky-voiced uncle who yelled: "Have you kids seen the kero tin that I use for the night urinal?"

During a quick trip to Cobar, New South Wales, I made friends with a shearer and we went on a three-day pub crawl taking in the Bowling Club, the R.S.L. Club, and all the town's pubs. Camped by a government water bore on the last night we caught about twenty yabbies using mutton fat and cotton. The interesting point is that the next morning I walked down to the water's edge and spotted two large whiskers protruding from a hole. I reached down, grabbed them and pulled out the biggest yabby I have ever seen. It was about  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb [350 g] — I'm a butcher by trade so the weight estimate was pretty fair. The mad shearer couldn't believe his eyes at the size of it so he laid it on the red hot coals left from the evening fire, roasted it, and ate it without even sharing it.

Rodd Haywood, Kingswood, New South Wales

My brother David sometimes popped a live yabby into an unsuspecting over-night visitor's

bed, behind the toilet door, and once even in the china chamber pot placed under an aunt's bed. Luckily she had a sense of fun.

Meg Goff, Tumbi Umbi, New South Wales

My closest encounter with yabbies came to pass in Bowral, New South Wales, during World War 2, where I worked in the Red Cross convalescent home. 'Berida' was its modest name then. Lately 'Berida Manor' has made news as the meeting place of heads of state, but in my time returned servicemen or women were sent to this attractive country retreat for short periods to convalesce. As you can imagine, the lads were eager for any diversion. A small waterhole on the walk into town provided one — it was a yabby hole. Having wheeled a slice of cold meat from the cook, off they'd go, dodging the dive-bombing magpie that threatened all comers, ducking under the barbed wire fence. They'd squat on the bank ready for action. Of course the hungry yabbies crawled onto the precious meat. My tastes being strictly run of the mill, I didn't join the clandestine feasts that followed but those yabby buffs made up for my lack of enthusiasm.

Nancy King, Coffs Harbour, New South Wales

Back in 1920. The venue — Yacka, South Australia. The yabby hole — Ducky Bend, a smooth sandy crystal-clear haven with dark bottle-green clay mudbanks perforated with thousands of holes used by Mr and Mrs Yabby and their families to live in comfort, yabby style, until invaded by the six, sometimes eight, of our family aged between five years and fourteen years, two girls, six boys. We'd strip off, jump in starkers, frolic around and get our toes nipped when climbing up the banks by yabbies objecting to the invasion of their privacy. Occasionally a dozen leeches on the legs and a yabby on the big toe was the picture.

Clare Wylie, East Brighton, Victoria

The Great Yabby Crisis has been solved. The G.Y.C. followed the Great Yabby Escape. The drama started in a train between Kyneton and Spencer Street. Ian Carstairs in Kyneton sells

yabbies to Alistair Herbert who runs Baxter Provender, the restaurant in an old house in Baxter, where the yabbies end up in yabby bisque or are given to customers à la school days.

À la school days means that you're given a hammer to crack your own.

It appears that in the train, half the yabbies escaped from the beer cans in which they were housed *a deux* (if any more are put in they start to eat each other).

The conductor evidently thought the swarming yabbies were a prelude to a sort of *Day of the Triffids*, so the railways people told Alistair: "No more yabbies . . ."

It's good to know this paper really publishes the important news.

Nancy Dexter, the Melbourne Age, 1975

I recall that Barney Marsh, late of Wennwagga, New South Wales, told me that one day he introduced yabbies into his farm dam. The climate and water suited them so well (he said) that they multiplied and grew. One day his bull went down to the dam for a drink. One of the smaller yabbies reached up and took him by the horns and pulled him into the dam where the adult yabbies ate him.

Lance Parker, Goolgowi, New South Wales

I remember one summer holiday heading off to Moonta Bay with my family in an old Dodge car. The weather was quite hot and it did not agree with the car, because every few miles the radiator would boil. One particular spot we stopped at was a creek, so as many containers as possible were used to bring water back to the car. I can remember it taking all day to travel just over 100 miles [160 km] with the temperature around 110°F [43°C].

When we finally reached our destination, my father decided to have a go at fixing the radiator. To his amazement he found one well-boiled yabby which obviously had been in the water from the creek.

D. Tarrant, Morphett Vale, South Australia

A yabby last week displayed a remarkable will to live. The yabby was one of "quite a few" caught by a Red Cliffs man. Each haul was cooked on the spot and on returning home,

the man put the yabbies into the frig.

He got a shock earlier this week when one of the yabbies in the frig was still alive.

"It might be a good idea to breed from this particular fellow," the man quipped.

Sunraysia Daily, Mildura, Victoria

The water supply in some areas of Bendigo was so dirty it had yabbies in it, two state A.L.P. candidates claimed yesterday.

They said yabbies had been caught in the filtration system at a community health centre, and people in the affected areas were afraid to make a cup of tea.

Rex Gardner, the Melbourne Sun, 1979

When the rain came after a recent long dry spell a yabby about 7 or 8 in [18 or 20 cm] long came up from the creek to the place where the household wood is chopped. 60 ft [18 m] from the creek. Here it selected a chip about 2 in long by  $\frac{3}{4}$  in wide [5 × 2 cm] and, holding it clasped lengthwise to its body with one claw, it made off to the creek.

A few nights later the yabby was again at the woodheap, and this time it discovered a small piece of paper. Holding this carefully with both claws, it carried it off as it had carried the chip. The next time I saw it, again on the same spot, it had a piece of wet paper from which it seemed to be tearing small pieces and chewing them.

The next rainy night I placed two small pieces of paper at its favourite hunting ground. Between 11 p.m. and midnight (it always came late) it was there tasting one of the pieces. It made off with this piece to the creek and I followed. It reached the little footbridge and a thud told me that it had tumbled off to the waterless creek below, and the last I saw of it, it was heading off down the creek bed, the paper still held securely in its claws.

On the following night the yabby was again at the same spot chewing the second piece of paper I had provided. The paper was thoroughly soaked by the rain, and I do not know whether it carried it off or ate it there, but it was gone the next morning.

On the previous evening I had offered a second piece of paper to a second yabby which had also come up from the creek. When

after a moment it noticed the paper in front of it, it seemed startled and backed off as though it had seen a ghost.

Ruth Schleicher, Hazelbrook, New South Wales, in a letter to *Wildlife Magazine*, 1946

I once did a lecture on yabbies in Pentridge Prison. I arrived when it was raining. I was really bedraggled and my beard was full of water and I had an old Ford muffler box full of beer cans with yabbies in them. This was my prop for the talk. When I arrived with the box all the warders immediately descended on me and said: "What have you got in the box?"

I had to open the box which was carefully sealed. They were all bending over it and I flopped back the lid and forty angry yabbies stuck their claws out at them. You've never seen so many men with so many guns move back so quickly. They'd carefully put one finger near these creatures and the yabbies would nip at them. They were supposed to be searching the box for drugs and knives and things but they only gave a very cursory examination of that box — they weren't too happy getting close to those claws at all.

Ian Carstairs, Kyneton, Victoria

In 1971 we had some friends who we had brought out from England staying at our place and both myself and my wife were at work when my wife got a desperate call from Denny, that was my friend's wife, saying that there's a *thing* on the floor in the kitchen. Denny had come from upstairs in her bare feet and had trodden on it. That was the first time I'd ever seen a yabby. Once, you've seen one you know what you're looking at next time but to me it looked like a prehistoric creature. Just imagine someone who has never seen or heard of the thing to see *that* for the first time on his kitchen floor.

Geoff White, Research, Victoria

As a great number of people were aware of the good hauls of marron we got, we took great care to cover our tracks and not reveal our fishing spot. This utopia lasted until one particular Saturday afternoon when we planted

our car in the scrub near the road. Loaded with gear we headed for our chosen spot.

After battling through the undergrowth some 50 m [150 ft] along the bank, with nothing on my mind but marron, I was suddenly shocked out of my contemplation by the sound of voices. To put things mildly I was flustered and all sorts of wild thoughts flashed through my mind. The possibility of Fisheries Inspectors was my uppermost thought, as I ran the risk of being caught poaching red-handed. Deciding that the wisest course of action was to lie doggo, I endeavoured to conceal myself in a very prickly patch of bushes.

As the voices came closer I knew that there were two people and I could only hope they would pass by without seeing me. The next noise I heard changed the whole complexion of the situation, for it was the triumphant cry of a fisherman who had just caught a beauty!

Relieved now that I knew the voices belonged to 'fellow poachers', I was very curious as to their identity, but decided to remain hidden until they reached my position. Closer they came, catching marron on every bait. They were obviously pleased with their efforts and judging by the comments, also very sure that they had the river to themselves. Before they reached me I was certain the voices were those of casual friends of mine. This was verified when they finally appeared out of the scrub, almost in front of me.

Still not declaring myself, I watched as one of them gingerly edged out onto a log and began pulling in a bait. At the crucial moment I roared out, at the top of my lungs, and the inevitable happened — splash — in he went! His mate, who was standing on the bank, turned toward me, his face pale with shock.

Confusion reigned supreme for a moment or two, but as always humour won the day. Then, as a wet and bedraggled marron fisherman floundered out of the river, he looked up at me and said, "Smith — you bastard!" At least we've found out where you've been catching all those marron."

The Discreet Poacher,  
from *Freshwater Fishing in South West Australia*

Van Helmont, a great dealer in wonders, is responsible for the story that, in Brandenburg,

where there is a great abundance of crayfishes, the dealers were obliged to transport them to market by night, lest a pig should run under their cart. For if such a misfortune should happen, every crayfish would be found dead in the morning: "Tam exitialis est porcus cancro!" Another author improves the story, by declaring that the steam of a pig-stye, or a herd of swine, is instantaneously fatal to crayfish. On the other hand, the smell of putrefying crayfish, which is undoubtedly of the strongest, was said to drive even moles out of their burrow.

**Professor T.H. Huxley in *The Crayfish. An Introduction to the Study of Zoology*, 1880**

Kookaburras love confronting yabbies which have strayed from their burrows. If the yabby stays at home, the kookaburra invites it out for a dinner date:

*I have known kookaburras to empty many nests of their contents, either eggs or young. But they lived principally on Yabbies, which they seemed to entice within reach by gently tapping the entrance to their burrow. When one came up to investigate he was promptly seized by the bird, who battered it on some favourite stump or branch.*

W.H. Dudley Le Souef,  
(former Melbourne Zoo Director)  
in *Wildlife in Australia*

Recalling days spent in the Warragul district about the turn of the century, Mr Charles Cole, one of our veteran bird men, mentions a day in the bush about Hazel Creek with a fine old bushman named Burville.

They heard a thudding sound which was strange to both of them, and investigating, found a kookaburra alternately jumping on the ground to make a thudding noise, and then listening intently with head cocked on one side.

Presently Jacky moved away a few paces, jumped and thudded again, and again listened, but this time he plunged his beak deep into the earth and pulled out a land yabby. Closer inspection showed that where Jacky was at work the ground was riddled with holes, some occupied by yabbies and some

deserted. The kookaburra had evidently studied their habits to some purpose and was moving from burrow to burrow 'knocking on the door' and then listening to stirrings below which would then indicate that there was someone at home. A swift plunge of the beak down the burrow did the rest.

P. Crosbie Morrison,  
*Wildlife Magazine*, 1944

Some Australians, when confronting a yabby out of water, seem compelled to 'hypnotise' it. This is a favourite pastime in bars and some of the older sports stores used to display rows of hypnotised yabbies in their shop windows, or on the counters. Here's how it is done:

*Murray River magic. Memories of the soft yellow glow of a Tilley lamp flickering as we played cards in our tent and listened to the sounds of the night. Pa was adept at shooting and trapping rabbits (aided by the fact that they were then plentiful) but his expertise at fishing left a lot to be desired.*

The yabbies eluded our pots and I was becoming sick of rabbits. Pa decided his yabby pots were in the wrong place in the swamp and we set off one morning to relocate them and rebait. As I waded through the smelly swamp feeling unknown horrors brushing against my leg, mud squelching in my shoes, and holding a bag of rotten rabbit meat, I realised Pa should have a grandson better able to appreciate the rigours of river life.

The next day we revisited the swamp and at last Pa triumphantly held up a pot of black knights in shining armour.

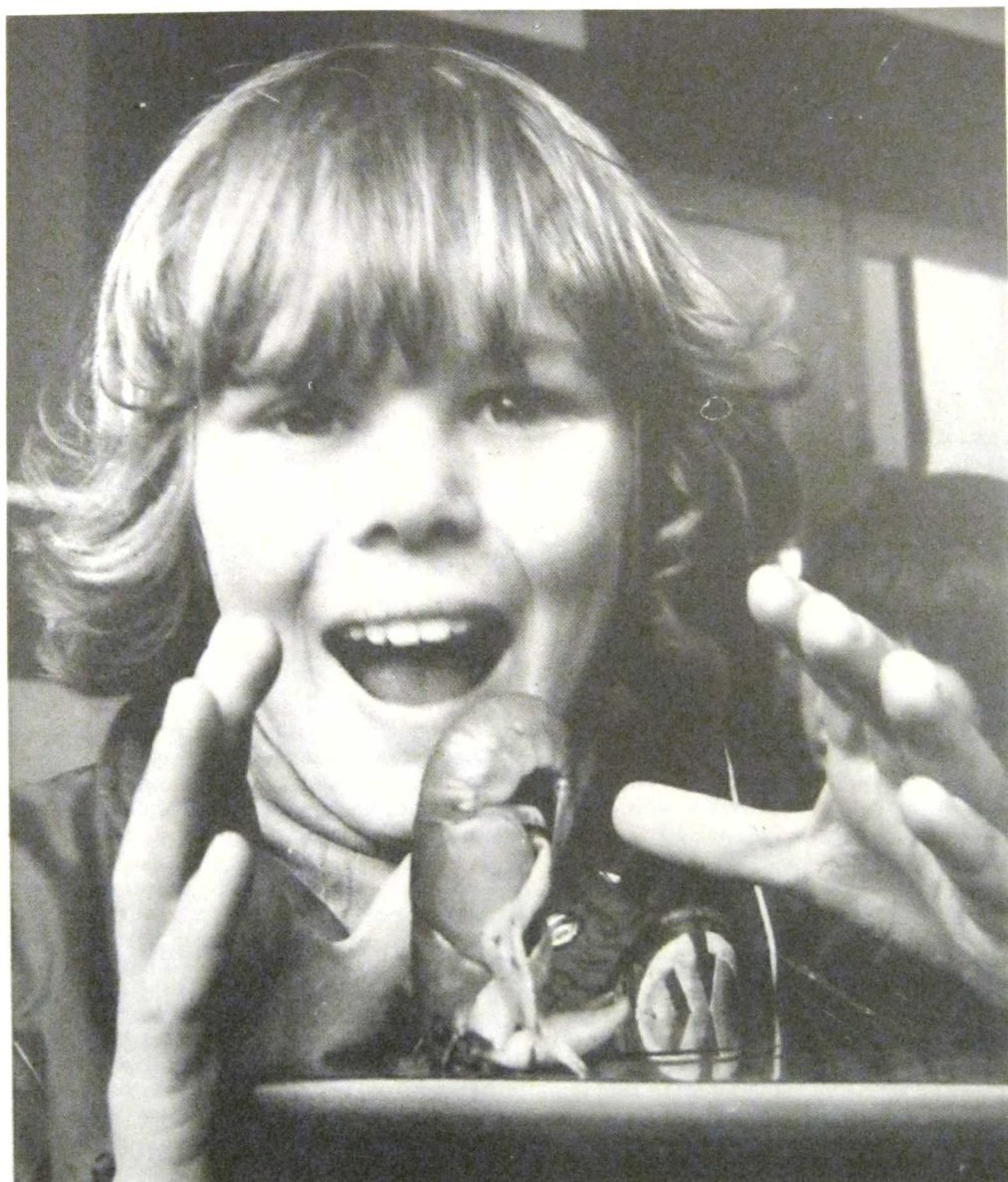
Hightailing it back to camp, Grandpa tipped the yabbies out onto a card-table and sent me out of the tent. Secret rituals took five minutes until he called me back in. I entered to see nine yabbies propped up on their claws staring vacantly into space, completely motionless. Visions of Pa staring at close range into a yabbie's eyes and whispering strange words flashed through my mind. Grandpa was satisfied at the look of wonder on my face and thumped the table hard. Down fell the yabbies, some slowly, some as if sprung into life from a catapult, crawling over and off the table.

I am glad to say Pa shared his secret

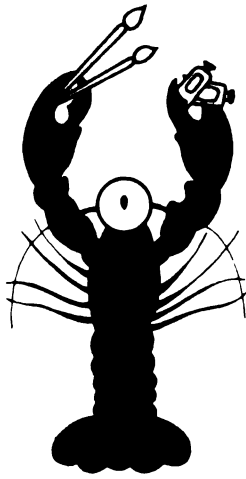
with me before he passed on, and these are his instructions for hypnotising yabbies "Grasp yabby firmly around neck in such a manner as to avoid those searching claws and prop it up by holding the claws underneath the body. Curl its tail down and under. Then simply stroke

between his eyes, up and down, gently with a fingernail for about thirty strokes."

Sandy Rettalick,  
Dover Grounds, South Australia



One of the all-time favourite bar room tricks — hypnotising a yabby — is practised here by Grant Williams.



## THE YABBY IN THE YARTZ

The yabby never really made a big impact in art and literary circles — its exposure has been minimal. It's almost as if there existed some strange conspiracy perpetrated by yabbydom to keep itself out of the limelight, to maintain a low public profile. Perhaps the yabby, contemplating life at the bottom of a mud-mire, foresaw the ill effects of stardom. After all, look what happened to the shark after *Jaws*.

Perhaps the average Australian's ill-conceived notion about the ordinariness of the yabby helps muses remain uninspired. Almost every other form of Australian wildlife has been honoured with literary posterity — bountiful verbiage on the blowie and the mozzie, mystical ponderings on the perplexity of platypi, possum paeans, bunyip ballads and dingo doggerel. Even the mussel has been celebrated in verse.

Perhaps the fact that for most of this century the yabby was regarded as a dam pest could explain the lack of cultural embrace, but then again, consider the prickly pear — the outback literati seemed obsessed with this cactoid Indian ring-in.

Contrast the yabby with its American cousin, the crawdad or crawfish, a brash little publicity seeker celebrated with passion in all manner of American literature, from the writings of Mark Twain

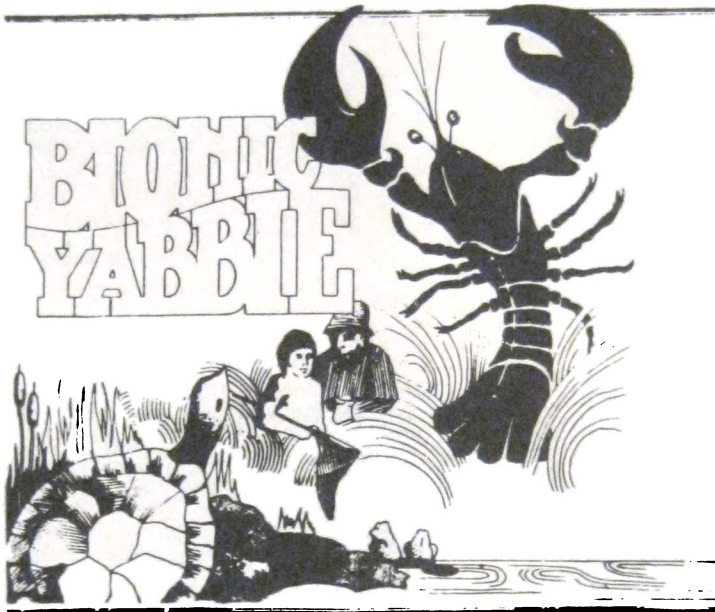
through to movies and popular songs. Possibly the most famous crawdad song is the 'Crawdad Hole', a southern folksong revived as a hit during the 1950s: "You get a line, and I'll get a pole, we'll go down to the crawdad hole."

Advertisements for Elvis Presley's movie *King Creole* promised a sound-track featuring "That big hit 'Crawfish', sung by Elvis Presley and the Jordonaires." Jambalaya, a Creole crawfish dish, became internationally famous when Hank Williams recorded the song 'Jambalaya'. An American music magazine is called *Crawdaddy*, and the crawfish often appears in cartoons in popular magazines.

### Yabbies on the Stage

Yabbies have rarely been invited to tread the boards in live theatre. Playwright Douglas Stewart did grant a fleeting mention to yabbies in his play, *Ned Kelly*. In a scene where Joe Byrne, a member of Ned's gang, discusses the informer Aaron Sherritt, Byrne says to Kelly: "We were kids at school together; we used to wag it and swim in the creek, sunbake and fish for yabbies."





The Victorian experimental theatre, La Mama, ran a play called **The Gentle Art of Lobster Whistling**. I thought it might be a play based on the life of a giant Tasmanian yabby, which is colloquially known as 'lobster', but it wasn't.

## Yabbies on the Silver Screen

Movie-wise, the yabby has been sadly neglected. There is a quaint sequence about children yabbing in an old newsreel, the A.B.C. produced some documentaries on yabby farming, and the Australian Government Information Service commissioned a 3-minute colour documentary.

Harry Butler, of course, has mentioned the yabby in his **In the Wild** TV series. Of the yabby, Harry said: "They're beautiful things, with strange and unexpected colour combinations . . . [they] illustrate ancient lines of animal evolution and change."

As for yabbies in your actual full-length feature movie, **Yabby Come Home** or some such, there's absolutely zilch. Some of our latter-day movie makers and critics have revealed a rather disturbing fixation with mutated yabby forms. Phillip Adams

presented, in the *Melbourne Age*, a movie skit called **The Patented Plot Plotter**. One patented plot ended with the heroine being consumed by a giant radioactive yabby. **Metro** magazine, published by the Association of Teachers of Film and Video, presented a workshop scenario for students, **Bionic Yabbie**, a parody of the South Australian Film Corporation's movie, **Blue Fin**. Metro's projected scenario included a bionic yabby which drowned the child hero's father and planned to take over the country town of Wyiponga.

## Yabbies in Song

Australia has no yabby folk songs, although the yabby enjoyed a brief period of dubious glory in Top 40 hit parade charts. In August 1967 the Wild Cherries, a rock group, released a hit single entitled 'Krome Plated Yabby', penned by Wild Cherry, 'Lobby' Lloyd. The odd thing about the song is that, apart from the title, absolutely no other reference is made to yabbies. I questioned Lloyd about the matter, thinking that possibly there was some obscure cryptic crustacean commentary I hadn't comprehended (Lloyd's lyrics can be

confusing — he once described his music as “cosmic fish jumps”), but Lloyd hinted that the restriction of yabbies to the title only was intentional. It was a private joke. Lloyd hailed from Queensland where they call a yabby a ‘lobby’, and he, being nicknamed ‘Lobby’, put the word ‘yabby’ in the title to see if any southerners made the connection, but none did.

Another yabby song emerged from the country recording studio Pioneer Country Sounds, of Swan Hill. This company sells pre-recorded music cassettes

almost exclusively in rural regions. Ken Robertson, one of the studio’s most prolific singer-songwriters, produced a cassette of children’s songs including the track ‘Yabbing’. A straightforward simple little ditty, but it has a rustic charm which fairly accurately captures the mood of children yabbing. One verse goes:

*Sun is shining on the water I see  
Be as quiet as I can be  
The line is tight and it’s on again  
Kids on the bank are yabbing*



This painting about the art of yabby catching was commissioned by Kaiser Maximilian I in 1499.



## The Artful Yabby

There are no fine art masterpieces depicting yabbies, except in Europe where the river crayfish, one of the yabbies' more cultured cousins (Europeans are like that) has been captured in oils. The painting opposite (artist unknown) was commissioned by Kaiser Maximilian I, in 1499.

The early twentieth-century school of Australian black and white comic art is internationally renowned. It is in this medium, and justifiably so, that the yabby is paid its full dues. The yabby Master Work was created by Percy Leason. His Crayfish Picnic (below) appeared in Melbourne's **Punch** in 1926, and it superbly presents his perception of the comedy of the bush.



Possibly the only writer who could have captured the same spirit of a country yabbing picnic would have been Steele Rudd, had he been moved to write about the yabby, which he wasn't.

Leaping forward to the 1970s, a period which the **National Times** proclaimed saw the emergence of a "new wave" of black and white artists, we come to the art of Michael Leunig, the master of what Barry Humphries described as: "Murky, melancholy and marvellous . . . little grisaille paintings." Leunig rarely dwells on politics; he very rarely dwells on yabbies. In the cartoon below, which appeared in **Nation Review**, 1977, he puts the two together.

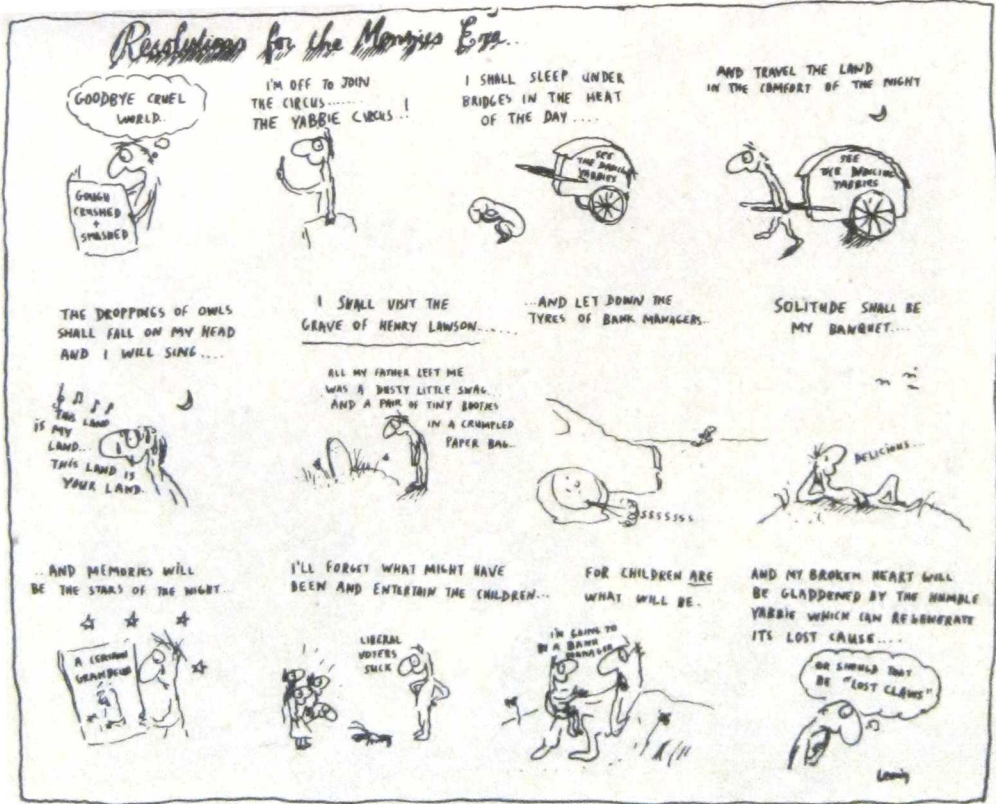
The **Herald-Sun** organisation syndicates one of the most intriguing Australian nature comic strips, Haddon and Trengove's **Wonders of Wildlife**. These curious tableaux present nature's stranger quirks and the yabby, being a rather strange

quirk itself, was duly presented in the strip in May 1979.

One of the great achievements in the inky world of newspaper comic strips is to appear as a **Ripley's Believe It or Not!** The bad news is that the yabby never made it. The good news is that the giant Tasmanian crayfish did.

Turning to yet another specialised form of art — the postage stamp. The European crayfish appears triumphant on stamps from Romania and Spain. An identified species of crayfish lurks on a stamp from Ifni.

Closer to home, and very close to the yabby, former Dutch New Guinea honoured the **Cherax** genus of crayfish with its own stamp. Will a yabby appear on an Australian stamp? Who knows? The philatelic section of Australia Post says there has never been a plan to stamp the yabby. No plans in the future either.





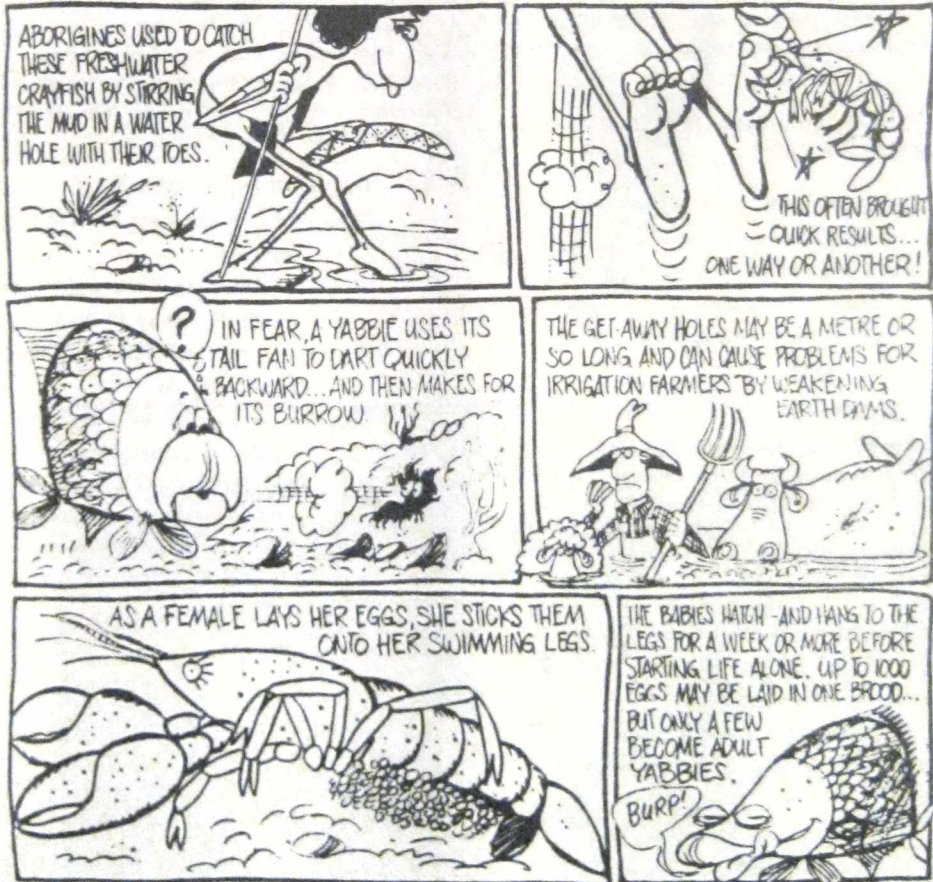
TASMANIA HAS  
 THE WORLD'S  
 LARGEST  
 FRESHWATER  
 CRAYFISH -  
 16 INCHES LONG  
 AND WEIGHING  
 8 POUNDS.



# Wonders of Wildlife

by HADDON and TRENGOVE

## THE YABBIE



## Yabbies in Verse

Yabby is a difficult word to rhyme and that's probably why most poets haven't bothered. Limerick writers are a hardier lot — to them the yabby represents a challenge. L.H. Dalziel, a South Australian widower, accepted the challenge and netted himself \$1000 prize money by winning the **Australasian Post** 1979 Limerick Contest with this masterpiece:

*A swaggy from Toon-bloody-gabby  
Was savaged to death by a yabby  
So unique was his fate  
That his sorrowing mate  
Had him buried in Westminster Abbey.*

Vane Lindsay penned the accompanying illustration reproduced opposite.

The **Sydney Daily Mirror** offered its readers this limerick:

*Nude swimmers beware the yabby  
Especially when its crabby  
For it's not unusual for some  
To fasten onto a bum  
Especially when it's low-slung and  
flabby.*

Of course, there are those who claim a limerick is not a limerick unless it's dirty, and this devastatingly dirty yabby limerick appeared in the South Australian **Magic Circle Magazine**, 1975. Mr Bruce Bilney owned up to authorship:

*A spinster, to ease her frustrations  
as dildos tried several crustaceans  
A shrimp was too limp  
and her prawn was soon worn  
but Cherax destructor sure fucked her.*

**Chain Reaction** magazine published this limerick:

*There was a young man called  
MacYabby  
Whose life was exceedingly happy  
But what tortured his soul  
Was the thought of a hole —  
And dead, at the bottom, a yabby.*

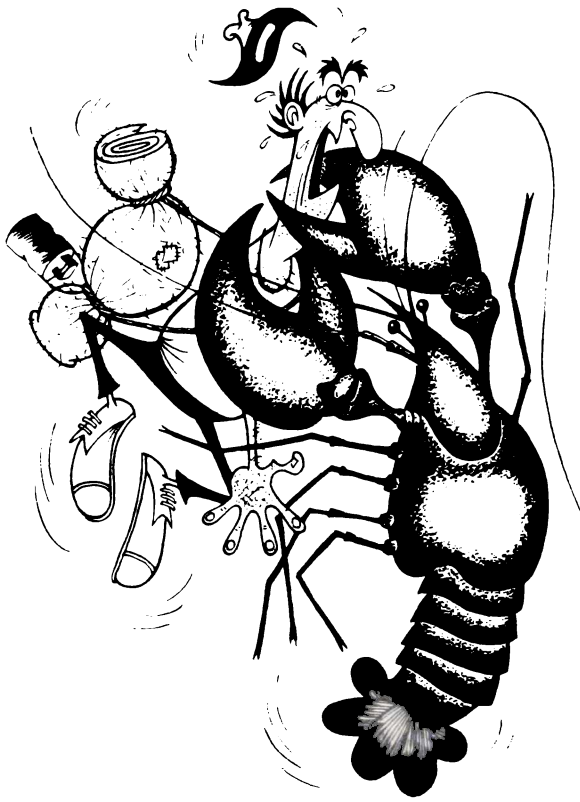
The limerick referred to odd-ball yabby researcher and farmer, Ian Carstairs, who has a tendency to publicly indulge in poetic yabby parody:

*Up jumped the yabby and dived into  
the billabong  
You'll never catch me alive said he*

and the occasional political verse. This example of the latter, together with John Dickson's cartoon (opposite), also appeared in **Chain Reaction**, 1978:

### THE YABBY'S LAMENT

*Poisoning's an old game in Australia  
for sure.  
It's been happening in the water-holes  
for 200 years or more.  
They spray the land and water, they  
mix it with flour.  
They kill the aborigines — and they're  
killing me what's more.  
Hark! The village clock strikes three,  
and is there yabby still for tea?  
Yabby's off, dear.*



Turning to serious poetry, David Campbell wrote 'Crayfish' for his book, **The Man in the Honeysuckle**. Campbell died just after publication of the book.

#### CRAYFISH

*Two children with meat and string  
Fishing for yabbies beneath the  
she-oaks*

*In the bottle-green river  
And a man in a starched bed  
Remembering*

*The yabbies*

*Grip with green claws  
The washed-out meat  
Coaxed by eyes over the gravel  
To death in a scalding billy*

*The green jewels flush goldfish red  
And young eyes meet  
— It was so quick the girl says  
They felt nothing  
In the bed the man lies rigid.*

## Yabbies and the Great Ostrillian Novel

Sydney humorist Jim Oram wrote:

*"Patrick White has not devoted long and bewildering pages to the yabby, nor has Thomas Keneally probed the agony of its tortured soul . . . I think this is unfair . . . The yabby deserves better than that."*

Quite right. The yabby's only venture into the literary world has been the occasional mention in novels and reminiscences. Writers such as Dymphna Cusack, K.S. Prichard, Colin McInnes, Kylie Tennant, J.J. McRoach and John Iggulden have mentioned yabbies in their work. But of the boys from the bush, the Henry Lawsons, Steele Rudds and Banjo Patersons, all is quiet on the yabby front. Even C.J. Dennis failed to write about the yabby although he was acquainted with the creature, as is shown by the photo (opposite) of him yabbing at Smedley's duck pond near Toolangi, Victoria.

Hal Gye, the artist responsible for the kewpie-like figures originally illustrating C.J. Dennis's **The Sentimental Bloke**, did honour the yabby in print. In the 1920s Gye switched talents and began writing, using the alias James Hackston. He wrote prolifically for the **Bulletin** and in 1969 published an autobiography: **The Hole in the Bedroom Floor**. Gye makes several mentions of yabbies in the autobiography. He writes about how he used to go yabbing with Wadadi, a half-caste Aborigine suspected of being a sheep stealer.

Gye described the countryside in which he grew up:

*"The road ran past the front door of our place and was the magnet that now attracted me while the mysterious bush tempted me from afar as, in instalments, I came into my inheritance of gums, hollow logs, grubs, yabbies."*

And he described watching yabbies in the local stream:

*"I found a cool shallow and, lying on my stomach, shoved my face into it and at the same time experienced that delightful feeling of letting a clear, clean stream (no tadpoles) flow into the mouth and go circling around it before trickling down the throat. And it was lovely to feel it running over my eyes as I looked at the bottom of the shallow and saw backing away from me, suspicious of me, a yabbie with his little round black eyes staring at me, and I bet myself that he'd never seen such a sight above him before. I couldn't help smiling as I watched him retreating backwards and kicking up the dust of the wet sand as he retreated to his hole in the bank."*

Norman Lindsay mentioned yabbies in his classic novel **Saturdee**:

*"Home at a bounding pace to yodel for Conkey and burst great news upon him. But Conkey had gone for the day to Criddle's Dam in the ranges with Bulljo and Snowy Critchet to swim and sunbake and catch yabbies, and get sunburned and bitten by sandflies and suchlike complements of the life crudely masculine."*

In Douglas Stewart's **Norman Lindsay: A Personal Memoir**, Stewart describes a pool on Lindsay's Springwood property, and the rather magnificent yabby it contained:

*"It was quite an impressive waterfall, and sparkled most prettily in the air as it tumbled,*





Another Toolangi picnic:  
Den with two companions, 1912.



Fishing for yabbies at Smalley's duck pond. Den and Florence in foreground.



Florence Mitchell, the attractive Toolangi schoolteacher.

Even C. J. Dennis was a sometime yabbier.

through banks of green hanging fern against a background of shiny dark-reddish wet sandstone, into the wide round pool below.

"This was inhabited by the biggest yabbie I have ever seen, about a foot [30 cm] in length, quite as big as the sea-faring lobsters you buy in the shops. His back was a deep green tinged with an underlay of red; his claws, which he carried proudly and menacingly before him as he walked, were a beautiful opalescent blue; and he strolled about underwater on the floor of his clear green pool, gorgeous as the Emperor of China.

"Jane [Lindsay], not to be outdone in elegance by a mere freshwater crayfish, stripped off her clothes and stood naked and white and golden under the crystal shower of the fall, looking exactly like a Lindsay watercolour."

In the 1850s William Howitt wrote a charming novel entitled *A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia*. Subtitled 'Herbert's Notebook', the novel presents the impressions of a young English

schoolboy introduced to the delights of the Australian bush. Herbert was very impressed with the yabbies and crays he encountered:

"I must not forget to remark that the crawfish and freshwater lobsters of this country seem to me more like reptiles than fish. There are crawfish here of a light blue, with rows of prickles all down their backs, or rather down their tails. They were very troublesome to us when fishing for other fish, for they were always at our lines. However, they are very good eating, and so we excused them. They are large — quite as large as the largest crawfish in England.

"Besides these, up in the brooks near the Snowy Mountains, that flow into the Mytta-Mytta and Yackandanda, there are regular lobsters, some of them as large as the sea-lobsters, and quite as good. Often when the Popkineses were washing gold we found something heavy and all alive in our bailer, the tin vessel at the end of a stick that we scooped up

water with, and lo! it was a great lobster, which we used to put in a bucket till we wanted him, for if we put him into a small water-hole, he was sure to take a sly opportunity and run away. What was still more odd, there were little craw-fish of a bright red, just for all the world as if they had been boiled. There were numbers of these, and we used to joke and say we supposed their ancestors had got boiled when there were volcanoes in these regions, as there have been."

Dame Mary Gilmore, in her book of recollections **Old Days: Old Ways**, 1934, wrote of her memories of yabbies and crays, and deplored the fact that crays were disappearing from rivers:

"When I first remember the bush you shot for possum without leaving the camp-fire; when I first recollect the Murrumbidgee you caught your fish in the reeds, or muddied the water at the edge to make them rise, and took them, not with a hook or a gaff, but by hand . . . At that time, often a freshwater lobster lifted from the Murrumbidgee was supper enough for father, mother, and two of us children . . .

"A few years later when I asked my father why we could not get fish as formerly he said, 'When the blacks went the fish went', meaning that the habit of preserving the wild was destitute in the ordinary white settler. Yet at that time the white population on the rivers was only a fraction of what the black had been.

"When my father-in-law first took up Burnside, his place on the Victorian Glenelg, he told me that anytime he could go down the brink from his house to the river with a kerosene-tin and a landing net, and half an hour later bring home two freshwater lobsters for the evening meal. He did not bring more than two, as usually these filled the kerosene-tin. Sometimes, smaller ones being lighter eating, he would put back the big two, and bring home three smaller ones.

"When I was there forty years later, you might fish for days, and bring home only yabbies. Indeed, in many of our rivers in all the States the big freshwater lobster, wanting the selective breeding care of the native, practically disappeared."

Alan Marshall, in his book **These Are My People**, suggested that he had more than a passing interest in Murray Crays. Marshall wrote that he used to wear an old sports coat and in the pockets carried,

"... three water-worn stones, a couple of parrot

feathers, a piece of string, the dried claw of a rivers crayfish, and the top half of a lizard's skull."

Marshall also wrote that:

"There was a knock at the door of our caravan and Dan entered. He stopped till two o'clock, God bless him. He brought us a bag of Murray River crayfish and told us he had come for a yarn."

In the outback yabby yarns are more prolific. During the 1960s central Queensland radio stations used to broadcast a yabby story called 'King Billy'. Queenslander Danny Pecket described the story and told me what it meant to him:

"As soon as I hear the word yabby, I remember that children's story I used to listen to when I was a boy. It was about a young lad who used to go to the creek to try to catch an old man yabby he called 'King Billy'. Everybody tried to catch King Billy, unsuccessfully, because he was so smart and too wise to be caught. But the lad persisted and finally he was rewarded with catching this big old man yabby. I remember the story well because it was my favourite.

"Christmas last saw me on holidays out west around Tambo-Blackall where I was raised and where all these yabbies were caught. I went on a yabby hunt, just to relive something I used to do. I caught a beauty and got some nice footage on my movie camera and have since put music to it, so now I'll always have a big yabby, one of my own.

"But the fun has gone out of catching yabbies nowadays."

The Wilcannia newspaper, the **Paddlewheel** (described by the **Australian Women's Weekly** as the "most unusual newspaper in Australia") published a serial called 'Yabby Man'. The legend of Yabby Man is as follows:

"Yabby Man shuddered as an eerie chill ran up his spine. The screams he heard brought back frightening memories of childhood. Before his eyes swam visions of cuddly young yabbies being torn apart by the cruel jaws of a European carp.

"Martin J. Hambone (alias Yabby Man) had not had his gills and flippers all his life. These had evolved as Martin had turned away from his people, taking comfort with the friendly yabbies of the Darling River. As a child Martin

had been frightfully ugly, and so Ma and Pa Hambone had done the only loving and humane thing they could do — drowned him at birth. (In a bag along with the mum cat's latest brood.)

"But as fate would have it, the near-dead infant miraculously escaped from the bag, and was seized by a friendly yabby who dragged him up into his roomy yabby hole. The Darling River yabby inhabitants cherished their new-found child.

"Martin never forgot the kindly yabbies and how the-dreaded European carp preyed on them so mercilessly. When Martin emerged from the primeval slime beneath the bridge, he made a vow to avenge all his yabby comrades against the vicious carp.

"Martin had plastic surgery on his hands and feet, and **always** wore polo-neck jumpers to hide his gills.

"As all strangers do in Wilcannia, Martin quickly fitted in with the community and vowed to preserve pasties, West End beer, and the west Darling way of life, as well as crusade against the carp."

Fishermen, of course, are famous for their fishy yarns. G.A. Scott, in his book **My Mate Moby**, spun a rather fantastic fish fable which included a crafty Murray Cray:

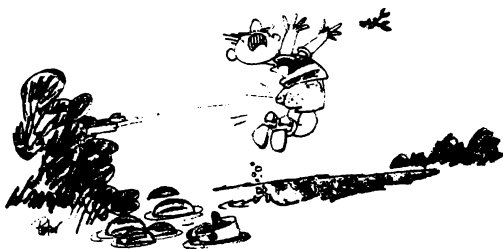
" 'You've got to remember Moby', continued Henry, 'that every fish respects the right of another fish to eat it. That's par for the course in our world. But we all hate the gutzes, the big greedy gutzes who don't know when they've had enough and just keep eating for the sake of eating. Seems this cod is that type of bastard and when the redfin told them about your trip every fish and cray in that part of the river grabbed it as a heaven-sent chance to get rid of the big slob. But', Henry went on, 'that was the easy part. The real problem arose when they tried to figure out how to let you know the hole this cod usually hides in. Two young trout, probably with an eye towards the annual *Pisces Valour Award* presentation, volunteered to tease the cod, then swim off slowly with just enough pace to keep ahead of him until they led him to your rabbit . . . Then a real smart crayfish had a brainwave. He figured that he and his mates could, by using their claws, move a lot of old mussel shells onto the log in the hole where the big bastard usually hung out. It meant luggin' big heavy shells right across the cod's own backyard so to speak. But they said they were game to give it a try . . . '

Multi-media personality Peter Russell-Clarke can also spin a wild yabby yarn. This one was published in **New Idea**:

"I remember, as a boy, we used to pinch watermelons and yabbies from a farm down by the river at Tumut. We'd rip sheets of corrugated iron off the roof of the town's pumping station, belt the ends together to make canoes, then seal the ends with melted tar we'd dig up from the road.

"The flotilla of tin would then set sail down the river, keeping under the overhanging willow fronds, until we got to the back of the watermelon farm. There was a hole handy in the fence which we'd scramble through to denude the dam and watermelon vines. We'd throw a chicken carcass into a punctured kero-tin with a lump of rope attached to the handle, and in a minute drag it out, jam-packed with wriggling wonders-of-the-murky-deep.

"Each tin cockleshell would have a tin full of yabbies and also be weighed down with watermelons so only an inch or two of freeboard showed above the river water. The farmer, a cunning devil, would hide behind some boxthorn and just as we went, bottoms up, through the fence with our last load, he would shotgun blast our backsides with saltpetre



"The distance he fired from frightened more than injured, but what it would do was send us Mr Bo Jangling into the loaded canoes which would instantly sink because of the furious jostling of trying to get into them and away. The water acted on the saltpetre, making us practically sprint across the top of the river.

"The laughing farmer easily collected his floating melons with a rake. He also usually managed to hook the handles of the floating tins of yabbies which he tipped back into the dam, none the worse for their adventure."

While no yabby novels exist, there are a few short stories devoted to the yabby. The following appeared, either as entities

within themselves, or as chapters in books.

'February Dragon' by Colin Thiele combines two chapters from his novel of the same name. Thiele, who refers to yabbies in several of his books, said:

*"I have a strange affection for yabbies, having grown up with them in the creeks of our district."*

'A Rod for Fishing With' by Peter Barker originally appeared in the **Bulletin** in 1949. The author, now a country doctor, wrote the story while a student. He said:

*"How things come back out of the past. I based the story on boys who used to go yabbing in the dirt channels that were then in the Red Cliffs area. It's all underground pipes now. No more yabbies, no more wild asparagus. Oh, nostalgia."*

During the 1940s a series of **Digit Dick** books appeared. Digit Dick was a sort of Australian Tom Thumb character, created by Leslie Rees, and the books are still in print. The story 'Digit Dick meets the Giant Tasmanian Crayfish' appeared as a chapter in **Digit Dick and the Tasmanian Devil**.

'Methuselah' by Rod McNair was a story featuring a giant marron, and appeared as part of a collection of fishing stories in a book called **Freshwater Fishing in South West Australia**, by Neil J. Coy.

'The Day the Yabby Happening Happened' was written by Peter Olszewski, and published in **Rats Satire and Humour** magazine, 1972. It's based on recollections of yabbing and yabby picnics in the central Victorian goldfields district in the early 1950s.

## FEBRUARY DRAGON

*The day before Christmas was an endless one. Resin, Turps, and Columbine had long since finished decorating the Christmas tree; the baking was all done, and the house had been cleaned; nothing was to be touched or eaten, no pets were allowed inside, games and competitions were forbidden because they made a mess; there was to be no cutting out with scissors or blades, and on no account were visiting children to be welcomed or entertained.*

*The reasons for all the bans and restrictions were clear enough. Aunt Hester was coming on Christmas Eve. She and Uncle Stan, Angelina and Cuthbert, were going to descend on them from Summertown at about six o'clock, and stay on to light candles, exchange presents, and eat for most of the evening.*

*It was part of an old tradition in Mrs Pine's family. No matter what they thought of each other, or what they said behind each other's back, they always exchanged visits at Christmas. And since Aunt Hester was coming to the Pines for Christmas Eve this year it was the Pines' turn to go to Summertown on Christmas Day. Thus for Resin, Turps, and Columbine there was no problem about tonight and tomorrow — these were already mapped out. But it was now only nine o'clock in the morning and Christmas Eve didn't start until six in the evening. In the meantime there were nine or ten hours to fill in somehow.*

*Luckily Burp Heaslip saved the day. He came sauntering past in bare feet and Tom Sawyer pants, carrying a ragged assortment of tins, twine, and sticks, looking like a cross between a hawker and a swaggie.*

*"What about coming down to the dam with a fellow?" he called.*

*"What for?" Resin yelled. "Swimming?"*

*"Yabbing."*

*"Ooh," Columbine shouted. "Yeah, let's."*

*"Got to call in at Barnacle's first. Mum wants a bit of stuff."*

*"See you there in five minutes," Resin called.*

*"Right y'are."*

*Less than five minutes later, Resin and Turps came flying into Old Barnacle's shop, with Columbine close behind them, even before Burp had finished his purchases. They helped him pack the groceries into an empty sugar bag and distributed the yabbing gear evenly among themselves.*

*"Is it a good day for 'em?" Resin asked.*

*"Not bad. Bit murky, but we'll get 'em."*

*"Come on," Burp said suddenly. "Let's get going or we'll never catch any yabbies." And the four of them bumped and bundled their way through the door and set off for the dam.*

*The dam was a big one that Burp's father had built in his paddock near the drive, a little way in from the main road. When it rained, the water from the road and the hill slopes drained down a channel to the gully that had been*

blocked off by a high bank. The track to Burp's house ran beside the channel till it reached the dam, and then swung suddenly to one side and curved up to the house. Mrs Heaslip was always telling Burp's father to put a fence or some rails around the dam in case a car forgot to follow the track past it one dark night and went straight on into the water. But Mr Heaslip wasn't concerned.

"Tarnation!" he said. "If anyone coming to see me is such an idiot that he can't even follow the track, then he *needs* a bit of cold water to brighten him up."

The yabbies liked the dam. They lived under the stones and ledges, or in the big muddy holes they'd made in the clay bank. Their claws were blue and mottled like smooth porcelain, with jagged saws and sharp nippers as strong as a pair of pliers. Their bony backs were smooth and blue too, tapering to the overlapping plates that curved beautifully into their tails.

Usually they waited, beady-eyed and still, at the entrance to their burrows. When the water was clear the children could see them there, with their feelers as alert as cats' whiskers and their front claws folded inwards like boys lying on their stomachs with their shoulders raised on their arms.

Sometimes Burp, who was quick and sharp-eyed, would say "Shhhh!" and point to a patch where the yabbies had left the shelter of their holes and stones and were crawling over the muddy bottom looking for food.

Then very slowly and carefully Burp would lower his wire dab-net behind them and drop down his stick or line near their noses. They stayed stock still for a minute with their feelers up until the stick came too close. Then suddenly there would be a puff of soft mud and a flick of their tails, as they shot backwards like jets — into Burp's net. Laughing and crowing he flicked them up and tossed them on to the bank where Turps and Debby scabbled and yelped as they tried to pick them up and drop them into the bucket.

But today it was too murky to see any yabbies on the floor of the dam so Burp set up hand lines for them. He took a lot of string out of one pocket, and a lot of rabbit meat from another, and tied some bait to the end of each bit of string. Then everyone took a line and jiggled it so that the meat fell near one of the yabby holes. After a while, when they could feel the yabbies tugging at the meat, they started to pull up the line very, very gently with the yabby still clinging

to the meat for all he was worth. Then, if they were lucky, Burp quietly slipped in the dab-net and whipped it up from below before the yabby could let go and escape.

As more and more yabbies were flipped up on to the bank Columbine leaped and shouted and yelled, trying to get a grip behind their shoulders before they could throw up their nippers and fasten on to his fingers. Once he let out a shrill yell and danced about with a yabby hanging from his hand, and when he finally shook it free there was a bead of blood where the nippers had punched through the skin. Columbine was almost crying, but the others tried to pretend it was a joke. "Hands are not so bad," Burp said, "but once I was walking about in the water barefoot and one of them got me just behind the little toe. Phew! Was he rough!"

Columbine stopped wringing his fingers. "Gosh, what did you do, Burp?"

Burp liked having an audience. "He stuck on there all the way out of the dam, and even after that, while I was hopping about on one leg up the bank."

Columbine forgot about his finger and watched Burp, open-mouthed.

"Gosh!"

"It felt as though he was cuttin' off me little toe. Claws like wire-cutters he had."

"Big?"

"Big! He could have crushed a bottle between them, nearly, I reckon."

"Jeepers!"

"And he kept pressin' those pliers of his, and I kept hoppin' about and hollerin'."

"You couldn't pull him off?"

"Pull him off? Not unless I pulled me toe off too."

"Gosh, couldn't you get his claws open?"

"You ever tried? Couldn't do it with a crowbar hardly, I reckon. Like a clam, they were."

"How did you get him off in the end, Burp?"

Burp brushed his sleeve across his face as if living the agony again. "Well," he said dramatically, "I hauled back with me leg and let go with a kick — like a footballer trying to get a goal from the centre. And there he went, that yabby, sailin' way over the top of the bank into the crop in the paddock over there."

"Jeepers!"

"Yeah."

"And your toe? How about your toe."

Burp?" Columbine was bent double in an agony of anticipation.

"Well, first I thought she was a gonner, flying up over the bank still clamped in that there yabby's claws."

"Ker-rikey!"

"But then I looked down and, blow me, there's me toe still stuck on me foot — only it's all sort of blue and patchy lookin' with a fair old lump of meat missin' from the side."

"Gor!"

"And you know what?" Burp looked round confidentially and Columbine kept his hand still, spell-bound.

"What?"

"I never ever did find that yabby again. He flew so far into the wheat crop I don't know if he ever crawled his way back to the dam again."

Columbine's eyes opened wider than ever. "Burp, d . . . d'you reckon he might still be in there, that same old monster yabby?"

"Could be."

Columbine packed up his things with finality. "Then I'm not stayin', Burp. I'm going home."

The others laughed, but started to pack up too. "Reckon it's about time. Must be getting late," Resin said.

Burp looked critically at the sun. "Way past lunch time."

Turps sprang up and grabbed her tin of yabbies. "Is it? Gosh, we'd better hurry. Aunt Hester'll soon be coming."

Burp gathered up his gear more casually. "See you in a couple of days."

"Yes, on Boxing Day. We have to go up to Summertown tomorrow."

"Roger!"

As Burp sauntered off along the track beyond the dam the three Pines hurried back the way they had come. Behind them, the ripples they'd been making on the water rocked against the shore and died away; the still air settled back around the dam again; and after a while the old blue crane who lived along the creek flew past heavily on his great slow wings. A few minutes later he came back, landed on the bank, and stood there silently like a grey metal statue. The dam and the paddocks and the whole wide countryside were still and peaceful again.

For once in her life Mrs Pine's arrangements for Christmas Eve were in confusion. Her husband was still out working in the paddocks. Aunt

Hester had arrived much earlier than expected, and the children had chosen this moment, of all times, to come home late and dirty from the dam.

For as Aunt Hester and Uncle Stan, Angelina and Cuthbert stepped out of the car, Resin, Turps, and Columbine came puffing up the track in their bare feet and yabbing clothes. Dust from the road and mud from the dam covered their legs and arms, and their hands smelt of rabbit-meat bait and yabbies. Turps's tin was a heaving mass of scrabbling blue claws, flipping tails, beady eyes, and long thin feelers.

Angelina minced up in a white nylon frock and peered into the tin. "Ooooooh!" she said, catching her throat with her hands as if about to be sick. "Aren't they horrible."

"Quite nice to eat," Resin said nonchalantly. "If you like we'll cook them and have them for supper later. They're like crayfish."

Angelina put her handkerchief over her mouth. "Don't, Melton! Please! I'll be sick."

Mrs Pine came hurrying out to break things up. "Here, you three disgusting tramps," she said sternly, "into the bathroom this instant. I'll give you ten minutes, the lot of you."

She sighed as she turned apologetically to Aunt Hester. "Children! Trust them to choose the wrong time for everything. Oh, Resin," she called just as the three renegades were disappearing into the bathroom.

"Yes, Mum?"

"As soon as you've finished, run and tell your father that the Bellonys are here."

"Righto!"

But Aunt Hester was in a very jovial Christmas Eve mood. "Never mind, Muriel," she said magnanimously. "Your job is so much harder than mine. If you only lived in town, with a husband who wore white shirts, you could have things so much easier. Look at Angelina and Cuthbert. I haven't changed their clothes all day."

"I don't know that I'd want to swap," Mrs Pine said tartly. Then, feeling that they were starting badly for the season of peace and goodwill, she bustled them all inside to plates of cakes, bowls of nuts, and limitless bottles of cold ginger beer. By the time it grew dark, and the Christmas candles had been lit, the two families were singing carols together like the friends and relations they really were. But it was too much to expect that everything would go smoothly. In

the first place. Resin almost started a stampede by guilefully suggesting to Cuthbert that perhaps he'd like to see how tame Pinch really was. Cuthbert at once blurted out the news.

"Oooh. Dad, did you hear! Melton's going to show us his pet possum. It's as tame as anything now and it can . . ."

Nobody ever heard what it could, because at that moment Cuthbert was cut short by a dish-rattling shriek from his mother.

"**The possum! Keep him away! Keep him away!**" She was standing in the corner, clutching her dress tightly around her legs, peering from side to side. "Muriel, keep that beast away! Keep him away!"

Resin's mother was angry. "Melton, don't you dare bring that animal in here; where is he?"

"Outside."

"Where outside?"

"In his cage."

"Well, what's Cuthbert talking about?"

"I just asked if he wanted to see Pinch, that's all."

"Don't be so stupid! You know what happened to Aunt Hester last time."

There was no need to remind anyone. Aunt Hester kept up such a vivid description of her ordeal for the next ten minutes that Uncle Stan and Mr Pine began to hope that Pinch would accidentally escape and start another scene of riotous panic. But at last she simmered down. The presents, which had been heaped tantalizingly around the foot of the tree, were distributed, and there was a great deal of paper-rustling, shouting, thanking, admiring, exclaiming, and even kissing while the presents were unwrapped, held up, and handed round for everyone to see.

"Just what I've always wanted," everyone said to everyone else, whether it was true or not — everyone, that is, except Mr Pine, who was too honest to be insincere and who stood, with a look of desperate resignation, holding yet another fiercely coloured tie from Aunt Hester.

"Now," Mrs Pine cried above the sound of jubilation, "we'll each share a Christmas cracker and then I'll get supper." She turned quickly to Turps. "Crystal" — it was always Crystal in front of visitors — "run and get the crackers from the sideboard."

"I'll get them." Columbine yelled shrilly, "please, can I get them?" He was off like a rabbit.

"And find something to put them in," his mother called after him. "A box or tin or something, so that each person can help himself."

"All right."

Columbine was so anxious for the excitement and mystery of the crackers that he rushed into the dining-room, seized an armful of them, and dashed out again before his mother's message really reached him. As he moved past the semi-darkness of the laundry door, however, he realized the need for a container; so he turned, dropped his whole load into a bucket there, and carried it hastily up to the sitting-room.

Then, holding the bucket up at elbow height, he offered the crackers round, each person thrusting his hand in like a customer at a lucky dip. Aunt Hester was busy with talk as usual when it came to her turn, but the whole house knew instantly that she was involved in some kind of disaster again.

"Eeeeeeeek!" The well-known shriek shrilled though the house, jarring Turps's teeth like finger nails scratched across galvanized iron. "Eeeeeeeek! Eeeeeeeek!" The next minute Angelina's voice joined her mother's. "Eeeeeeeek! Eeeeeeeek!" Everyone jerked around to see, and this time even Mr Pine was genuinely startled.

For hanging from the point where Aunt Hester's finger and the Christmas cracker met, was the biggest blue-nipper yabby in Turps's collection. He had fastened securely on to both the cracker and a bit of Aunt Hester's skin with one claw, and was thrashing about angrily with his legs and feelers, while poor Auntie thrust her arm out from her body like a wooden scarecrow, leaning far over and redoubling her shrill shrieks.

"Hang on, Auntie!" Resin yelled rushing up. "I'll get him."

But as Aunt Hester pointed out shrilly afterwards it wasn't *she* who had to do the hanging on; the yabby was doing that quite effectively. Even Resin had a hard time trying to separate them, and it wasn't until he'd prized open the yabby's claws with a meat skewer that he managed to free the pinched finger. Really it was no more than a needle prick, with a little bead of red blood where the sharp nipper had punctured the skin, but no doubt it hurt a good deal and seemed much worse than it really was. At any rate, Aunt Hester made it sound that way. She wrung her hand and went off, wailing.



to the medicine chest with Mrs Pine to find antiseptic, cotton wool, and adhesive plaster. When she returned she was as noisy as a bucketful of stones.

"If it's not possums, it's crayfish," she yelped. "Every time I visit the Pines something attacks me."

Uncle Stan pretended to be concerned so that he wouldn't seem to be enjoying himself too much. "It is getting dangerous, Hester," he said. "There are always animals and reptiles waiting to take you by surprise."

But Mrs Pine was terse. She was afraid Aunt Hester would begin to think that these accidents were deliberate; she wasn't even sure herself whether the children were playing some kind of clever practical joke.

"Colin," she said severely. "Come here."

Columbine shuffled up and stood before her, hanging his head.

"Now, young man, would you mind telling me how the yabby happened to get mixed up with the Christmas crackers?"

"It was in there."

"What do you mean, it was in there?"

Resin felt he must come to the rescue of his young brother. "They are all in there. Look!" He held up the bucket revealing the creaking scrabble of yabbies in the bottom. "It was the yabby tin, the one we used at the dam today."

Mrs Pine looked even more severe. "Then how did it come to have the crackers in it?"

"I didn't know," Columbine was wide-eyed with innocence. "I didn't know it was the bucket."

"For heaven's sake talk sense, Colin! What didn't you know?"

Resin tried to interpose again, but his mother silenced him sternly.

"Well?"

"You said to put them in a tin or something, you said so." Poor Columbine felt somehow he was getting on to very slippery ground.

"Put *what* in a tin?"

"The crackers. You said. And I was carrying them all when you said it, and I went into the laundry and . . . and . . . and I put them straight into the bucket and I brought the bucket out, and it had all the yabbies in the bottom of it, underneath, and I didn't know it at all. No, I didn't know!"

Columbine stopped, breathless and self-

righteous, waiting anxiously to see if his obvious innocence had finally appeased his mother and calmed the long thin anger of Aunt Hester. Luckily it amused Dad.

"Well, that beats all," he suddenly roared, shaking with laughter. "If you'd left him alone Muriel he would have brought all the crackers in without any fuss. But because you wanted them in a tin you got yabbies and all, like a lucky-dip."

Uncle Stan burst into laughter too. "Lucky nip, more likely, wasn't it, Hester?"

And although Aunt Hester still didn't think it was anything to joke about she could see there was no point in making a fuss over it, especially on Christmas Eve. So everyone joined in singing more carols, eating supper, and wishing more good wishes until it was time for the Bellonys to go home. Even that was only an interlude.

"See you for Christmas dinner tomorrow," Aunt Hester cried shrilly as they drove off, "and don't be late."

"No. We've got four and twenty possums baked in a pie," Uncle Stan added, "and lots of live crayfish in the plum pudding. Better watch out for nips on the noses." He drove off laughing with everyone waving and calling out.

# A ROD FOR



# FISHING WITH

*By* **PETER BARKER,**

Jamie sat on his stool at the kitchen-table, and licked the traces of jam from the corners of his mouth. His mother was at the sink by the fire-place, setting in order the dishes from breakfast. Soon, she carried the big black kettle from the stove, and, filling the sink, began to wash the dishes.

Jamie watched the steam rise from the sink until she called:

"Come on, Jay-bird. You ain't goin' to fly away before the dishes this morning."

He was silent for a while as he dried the warm plates. There was something he wanted to do. He planned it all the week.

"'Ave y' got any bones, Mum? C'n I have some meat off've 'em?"

"What for?"

"Yabbyin'."

"I'll have a look when we've finished the dishes. Where you going?"

"Jus' down to Gingham corner. In the mud channel."

"You be careful."

Jamie was silent, but his toes wriggled against the straps of his sandals.

When they had finished, his mother went to the ice chest, wiping her hands on her apron. She

took a big plate from the bottom, and put it on the table. Jamie touched the cold skin of the leg of lamb as she went for a knife. He thought how clean the pale red flesh looked. His mother cut the knuckle from the meat, and wrapped it in a piece of newspaper.

"Got a knife?"

"M'm."

"Cotton?"

He nodded, and put the parcel of meat inside his shirt.

"Don't you be late for dinner, now," his mother said as he let the kitchen-door swing shut behind him.

"No, Mum," he shouted.

He went across the back porch to the washhouse. The sun shone through the vine-leaves on the trellis above, making bright patches on the crazy paving. He stepped over the basket of washing in the door of the washhouse, and crawled beneath the sink. Leaning against the wall was a small net, made from wire-netting and fencing-wire. Behind it was a round tobacco tin. He took them out into the sun, and opened the tin. There was a small pen-knife and a cotton-reel inside. Satisfied, he put net, tin, and the parcel of meat into a dip-tin, and was ready.

He went out across the drying-green, and between the racks. His father was at the dip at the end of the racks. Jamie watched while he cranked the handle of the dip-crane, and lifted the tray of grapes from the cart. His father turned the arm of the crane around so that the tray swung over the dip. He let the tray down slowly. The white, soapy water gurgled up through the holes in the dip-tins and about the bright green fruit.

"Where you off to?" said his father.

"Down to Gingham, yabbyin'."

"The Doc. and me're goin' fishin' tomorrer. We'll want some bait. Give you sixpence a dozen."

Jamie frowned.

"What's up, somebody else want them?"

Jamie decided suddenly, and smiled.

"O.K. How many d'you want?"

"Aw, about six dozen."

"I'll try."

Jamie walked over the channel bridge and down to the vines. "Cheerio," his father called. "'bye," he yelled back. He went into the row between two vines. The two plough-tracks stretched crookedly down between the leaves to the end of the row. The bottoms of the plough-furrows were smooth and flat where the water

had run down, but outside that the red soil was broken up into big, irregular clods.

He went down the row, the soil running into his sandals. He swung his dip-tin against the heavy bunches of grapes. He picked a small bunch, and ate them before he reached the fence at the end of the block. He climbed through the fence, and walked through the grassy seepage to the road.

The road was very white against the bright green of the vines. He scuffed at the gravel with his sandals, and the white gravel-dust rose in front of his feet. He walked down the long stretch to the main road, and turned to the right. He walked at the edge of the metal, and kicked the small blue stones in front of him. Now and then a car passed him, and occasionally a truck with sweat-boxes full of fruit.



As he came up to the channel, he saw that the water was low, and that a foot of spongy mud showed at each side. He put his dip-tin down beside the concrete culvert,

and took out the small tin. He unwrapped the meat, and cut it from the bone and into small pieces with the knife from the tin. He broke off some lengths of cotton, and tied a piece of meat to one end of each length.

He took the wire-net and baited lines, and climbed down the bank of the channel. He walked along, away from the road, and at small intervals threw the meat into the water, tying the other end of the cotton to tufts of spear-grass. When all the lines were gone, he sat down on the bank at the edge of the water, and, taking off his sandals, dabbled his feet in the water.

Away to his right, the channel curved round out of sight amongst some trees. There were dark green Mallee-pines, and big, grey belars, and a few leafy cedar-trees. It always looked greener there, and the water cooler. He thought that he would follow the channel around there some day.

He looked back towards the road. Some of his cotton lines stood straight out from their grass tufts, and some hung limply in the water. He went to the first taut line. He dipped the wire-net slowly beneath the water with one hand, and with the other gently



drew in the cotton. He felt the jerking of the yabby on the line. The meat came floating up through the yellow water, and beneath it he could see the big green claws and the small tubular body. Gently he moved the net beneath, and suddenly lifted it, upwards and out of the water. Flap, flap went the yabby in the net, beating its tail against its body. He picked it up, holding it just behind the head, where the claws could not reach, and looked at it. Beneath the green-shelled back, the white, segmented under-surface of the tail bore a row of black eggs.



Jamie climbed to the top of the bank, and ran along the culvert. He dropped the yabby into the dip-tin. Its claws made a scraping sound against the tin as it tried to climb out. Jamie took the tin back with him and went along the row of lines.

Soon his tin was full of yabbies. He watched the mass of green bodies and claws. One big one held a smaller one up in the air by a claw. As he watched, the smaller one fell, and the other was left holding the severed claw. Jamie pulled some green grass from the bank, threw it into the tin, and then dipped the tin in the water. Then he sat for a while, squeezing the mud between his toes, and feeling the warmth of the sun on his head.

His mother was just calling his father to dinner as Jamie ran across the drying-green. He dropped the dip-tin by the tank, and turned on the tap. The water ran through the holes in the tin. It soaked into the ground about the bottom of the bucket. The yabbies stirred, and clawed against the tin. Jamie washed his hands and face in the water from the tank, and went inside.



His mother was at the stove, mashing potatoes in a saucepan. The fork scraping against the metal sounded like the yabbies in the dip-tin.

"Did y' get many, Jay-bird?"

"M'm, 'bout seven dozen. They was bitin' like anythin'."

His mother served out the potato, and brought over his plate. His father came in and sat

down, as Jamie started to eat.

"Good crop this year," said his father. "We're making four buckets to the vine. By gum, these pickers 're keepin' me goin'. Takes me all me time t' keep up t' them with the empties."

Jamie waited until his father was eating.

"Dad. I got y' six dozen."

"Good on y'. Where've y' put 'em?"

"They're just in a dip-tin now. I'll put 'em in the copper."

"If you leave those things in my copper until they die and smell the place out again, you won't go yabbyin' any more, Jamie."

"Dad's taking 'em tomorrer, Mum."

They ate in silence for a while, then Jamie asked casually:

"Dad, c'n I take one of the fishin'-lines this arvo?"

"Yep. Y' c'n 'ave that one on the cork. But don't take any o' the gut, or I'll kick the pants off y'."

"C'n I have a two-hooker?"

"Y'c'n put another hook onta that'un."

Jamie was pleased, and finished his dinner quickly.

"Don't you go near the cliffs," said his mother as he went out to the garage.

"No, Mum," he called back. He felt bad about lying, but thought that, anyway, this was different. To-day was important.



He pulled out the big box from beneath the garage bench. It was covered with oily dust, which smudged his fingers as he lifted the lid. He put aside the big reels of the cross-line and spinner and took the flat roll of green line on the cork from amongst the lines on the bottom. His father's rod was on one side. He turned the reel a few times before he took another hook and snare for his line from the flat yellow tobacco-tin.

He came out from the darkness of the garage and squinted in the glare of the sun. He walked around the outside of the porch trellis, and between the orange-trees to the tank-stand. He took the dip-tin into the washhouse, filled the copper with water, and tipped in most of the yabbies. They flipped themselves backwards with their tails into the darkness at the bottom. The others he put into an old army pack that was hanging by the door, with the fishing-line.

Jamie came out past the last block before the river. Leaving the road, he walked

across the headland. The earth here was very flat, between the islanded clumps of spear-grass, dried white by the sun. His feet made no impression on the baked red clay. He walked through the Mallee-gums, thin writhing boughs that arose directly from the ground. Tendrils of bark hanging down scraped against his shoulders. He saw the edge of the cliff ahead, falling away to nothingness beyond. As he came closer, the blue-grey horizon of the other side of the river edged itself into sight. Soon he was at the edge, and looked down the rough red sandstone cliffs to the water. The sun was behind him, and shaded the cliffs and half the width of



the river. In the shade the water was a dark greyish-green, and held shimmering reflections of the gullied cliffs and the trees. In the sunlight the water was an opaque, muddy yellow.

Jamie walked along to the right. Here a large gully ran back from the water, branching to smaller clefts and fissures. He climbed down into a small crevice, and followed the dry floor. The walls about him grew higher, and changed color from red to white and yellow, and back again. Down in the main gully the floor was covered with short spiky grass that broke under his feet as he walked. Just by the river a big grey ghost-gum reached its thin white fingers almost to the top of the cliff.

He went down to the water's edge, and turned to the right. He walked along the edge of the water, where a thin strip of white sand fringed the red sandstone. For a little way out from the edge, the crenellated water-hyacinth leaves made flat patterns on the water. Closer in were a few patches of reeds, straight yellow-green blades waving in the slight breeze. He climbed up the cliff a little way to pass a fallen tree that lay half in the water. The tangled bare roots held crumbling pieces of clay. On the other side of this tree the river curved round sharply, and the water was very still and dark.

Jamie put down his bag, and took out the line. He unwound the cord into loops on the ground. Choosing a yabby from the bag, he held it behind the claws, and ran one of the hooks through the soft tail. The small legs waved impotently, and the tail flapped. He baited the other hook, and then threw the line out to the deepest part, just by the big snag. He settled himself on the thin strip of sand, and waited. The

lonely cry of a parrot floated down from the top of the cliff, and from across the river a cowbell echoed back into the gullies. The shadow of the cliff crept slowly out across the river.

They heard him call as he ran up through the racks. His mother said:

"I'll bet he's got a fish, Jim."

They went outside, and across to the gate in the trellis. They saw Jamie silhouetted against the deep orange of the horizon. His white shirt bobbed through the purple velvet half-light amongst the orange-trees.

"Mum! Mum! I caught a beauty!" he panted.

Soon he was jigging and puffing in front of them.

"It was big 's me. I couldn't lift 'im out've the water."

"What've y' done with 'im?" said his father.

"I tethered 'im to a big snag."

"Fix 'im right?"

"M'm. Like you showed me."

"Well, come and have tea, anyway," said his mother. "Go and wash, Jamie."

As Jamie sat down to his meal, he said to his father:

"How much'd I get f'r 'im at Jimmy the Greek's, Dad?"

"'E gives one-and-six a pound for cod."

"'Ow much'd that be f'r this 'un?"

"Depends 'ow big 'e is."

"Oo, big as me."

"Be about twenty pounds. That's thirty-bob."

"Will y' take 'im in for us after tea?"

"If there's enough petrol."

Jamie hurried through his meal. He felt a tight knot in his stomach, and it was hard to swallow his food. When he had finished he ran to the door. As he put his hand on the knob he suddenly remembered and turned round. His mother was smiling at him from the table.

"No, I don't want any. I've got too much food now that'll just waste if we have any fish. And I'll do the dishes."

Jamie grinned and ran out to the car. A little later his father came. As he started the car his father said: "Whereabouts is it?"

Jamie was silent a moment, and then said in a very small voice: "Down by the cliffs, Dad."

"Hm'm," said his father. "Well, don't tell y'r mum."

In the torchlight the fish seemed enormous. It flipped sluggishly in the smooth water and opened its great mouth, worrying at the cord in its snout.

"How the heck did you hold it, Jamie?"

"I hung on to the snag. 'E almost pulled me arm off."

His father put a bag over his shoulders and hoisted the fish on to his back. They climbed back to the car and laid the fish on a tarpaulin from the back. His father cut through the gristly part beneath the gills with a sheath-knife. The great fish jumped several times, and then was still. They wrapped it in the tarpaulin and put it in the back of the car.

As they drove along the metal road into town Jamie said casually: "How much does a rod cost, Dad?"

"Y' c'n get 'em f'r about two quid."

Jamie was silent for a few moments.

"Y' couldn't get one f'r about thirty-bob, could y'?"

His father looked at him and smiled at the small face looking directly forward into the head-light glare.

"I dunno, y' might."

They stopped at the Bird of Paradise café. A long glass tube flowed with light along the front of the shop, and a thick cloud of insects buzzed and clacked about it. Dead insects fell about them as they went inside. Jamie waited at the sweets counter as his father carried the fish to the back of the shop. The proprietor came out from the back. He was a short man with dark skin and a strong hooked nose. He hissed in surprise as the fish was unwrapped.

"How you get heem? Onna spinner? Cross-line?"

"I didn't get him. The kid 'ere got 'im on a hand-line. Not bad, eh?"

"Pretta good. No fear. Nearly big as heem, hey?"

"'Ow much for 'im?"

"Onaseex the poun' I pay for 'eem."

His father winked at Jamie as the Greek hooked hand-scales through the snout and held it up for the reading.

"Twenta four poun'. Verra fine feesh! That-a-make thirtaseex-bob."

"Good."

The Greek wiped his hands on his apron

and they went down the shop to the cash-register. Jamie wrapped up the tarpaulin and followed. As he came up to them his father took the tarpaulin and the Greek counted out to him. "One-poun', thirta-shillin' and seex-bob."

After school Jamie ran out across the playground towards the town. As he climbed through the fence by the railway yards his school-bag caught on the wire. He jerked it off impatiently. Down the bank he went and over the mounds the excavations had left. Across the tracks, his feet crunched into the cinders. He scrambled through the fence on the other side and ran across the road to the public square. He ran across the lawn and between the jacaranda-trees, around the water-towers and down past the bus-stop.

He stopped when he was in front of the store. While he got his breath he read the notice above the window, **Wilson's Sporting Goods**. A notice in the window said "Fishing tackle. Bait by arrangement." Jamie went to the window and looked at the things on display. He dwelt a little on a pocket-knife but looked on. He could not see what he wanted. He went inside. A fat man was reading a paper behind the counter. He looked at Jamie over his spectacles as he came in.

"Yes, young-fellamelad. And what can I help you to?"

Jamie held his breath. He touched the money in his pocket, the money from the Greek, and the money that his father had give him for the yabbies. He wished that he could make this moment last for ever.

"Well? What do you want, laddie?"

"I want a rod," said Jamie huskily. He cleared his throat and said firmly: "A rod for fishing with."

## DIGIT DICK MEETS THE GIANT TASMANIAN CRAYFISH

Dick and Boska had fallen into a river, not a very wide one, clear-flowing between loamy banks. Here and there willow trees were drooping into the water. In fact, it was a very lovely part of the country. Yellow and chocolate-brown and deep green fields were filled with crops or rich upturned soil, the trees were in round-backed waving clumps or set in close lines and not far away high purple hills were capped with delicate floating mists. But Dick didn't see any of this. As soon as he smacked the water and let go of his parachute, he went straight to the bottom of the creek — and it was a long way down.

At the bottom, the water was coloured like tea and there were lots of old sticks and dead leaves swaying in the tide. As Dick touched these, he knocked a sort of brown slimy stuff off them and this made the water even harder to see in.

"Whew! I think I'd better get out of this," said Dick to himself. "I wonder where Boska is." Boska hadn't followed him.

Just as Dick was about to swim up to the top of the water, he saw somebody coming. It was a funny-looking creature and he didn't much like it. It had a long round-backed body and feelers sticking out in front as well as two big claws and two eyes and a lot of legs and a fan-shaped tail. Very ugly and black and hard and shiny-looking. Quite a monster, in fact.

"Just a minute, just a minute," said this creature to Dick, in a mournful voice. "Accchooooo Accccchoooooooooo! Oh dear!"

"Aren't you well?" said Dick.

"Accchooooooooooooo! No, I'm not at all well," said the creature. "I've a bad cold. Accchhhooooooooo! Sniff sniff! But that's not all I'll tell you about it if you'll promise to help me."

"Well, if you don't take long," said Dick. "I have to get out of this creek and find Boska."

"I'd be very grateful if you'd help me," said the creature. "My name's Cyril F. Crayfish."

"Cyril F. Crayfish?" said Dick. "What's the F. stand for, please?"

"Freshwater," said the creature. "Cyril Freshwater Crayfish. I hope you don't think it

boastful of me to mention it but my sort of Tasmanian freshwater crayfish is the largest sort in the world. Accchoooooooo, oh dear! But that's not much use when you've got as many aches and pains as I have. Do tell me your name?"

"It's Digit Dick," said Dick.

"That's an unusual name," said the creature.

"It's because I'm only as big as my mother's big toe," said Dick. "My daddy says another name for a toe is a digit."

"Oh," said the crayfish. "I haven't seen anybody like you before. You **are** a bit like the pieces of meat that come down to the bottom of the creek tied on to string when people are trying to catch us crayfish. Acccccchoooo! Accchoooo! Oh dear, sniff, sniff. But you must be different because you can talk and you wear a red coat."

"Please tell me what is the matter with you?" said Dick.

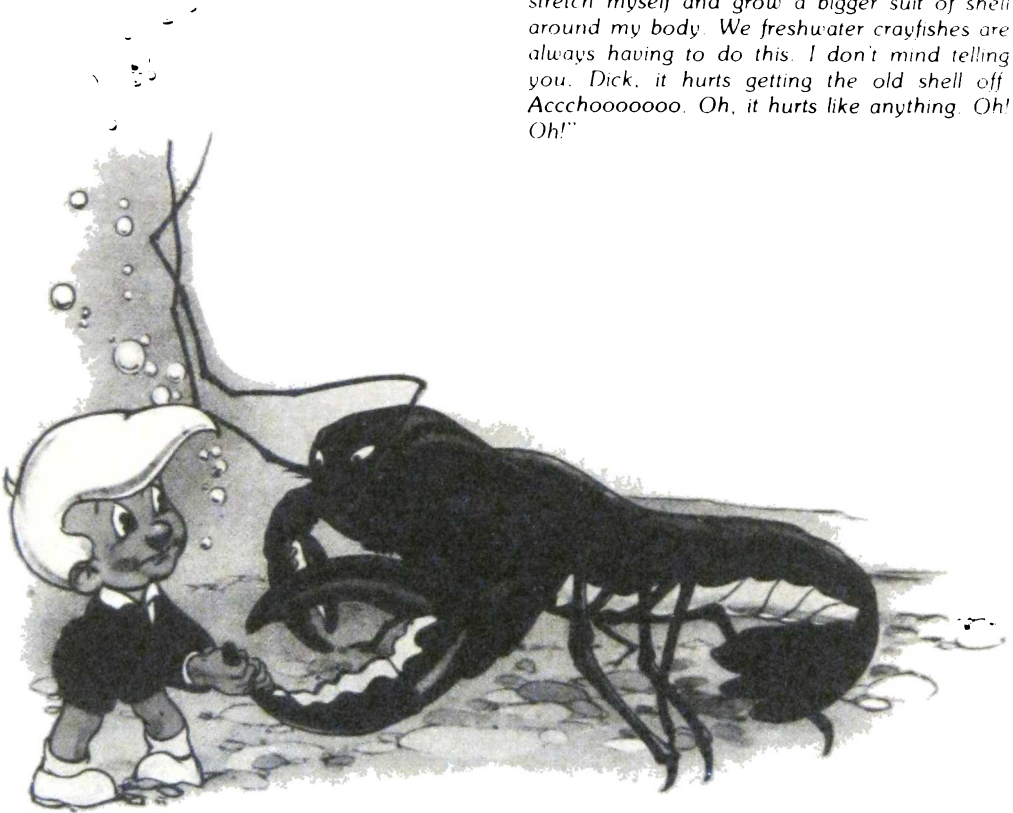
"Well, it's this way," said Cyril Freshwater Crayfish, and he sneezed two or three more times. "When you want to take off that red coat of yours, you just unbutton it and slip it off, don't you? But I'm different. This hard shell around my body and claws and head is **my** coat. And it's getting too tight because I'm growing too big for it. Accchooo! Accchooo! As if having this cold weren't bad enough."

Dick was puzzled. "Well, what can I do to help you, Cyril?" he asked.

Cyril Freshwater Crayfish was pleased. "Oh, thanks for being friendly," he said. "That's more than the trout fishes are. Look, there are some of them swimming by now. They won't help me."

Dick looked and sure enough saw four or five longish brown fishes prowling past. They threw up their noses when Dick and Cyril looked, and swam on pretending that they didn't see.

"It's this way, Dick," said Cyril. "If I can get rid of this hard shell of mine, then I can stretch myself and grow a bigger suit of shell around my body. We freshwater crayfishes are always having to do this. I don't mind telling you, Dick, it hurts getting the old shell off. Accchoooooooo. Oh, it hurts like anything. Oh! Oh!"





"And I suppose when you get it off and don't have a shell for awhile, your cold will get worse?" said Dick.

"Yes, I suppose it will," said Cyril sadly. "But that will be better than having this tight shell squeezing me all day. Now what I want you to do, Dick, is help pull off this shell."

"Where do I start?" said Dick.

"We'll start with the covering of my eye," said Cyril. "Oh, yes, I have to lose that. And the lining of my ear, too. But on second thoughts perhaps I can manage those myself. Now, you take hold of these two feelers near my head and pull hard and I'll work my muscles underneath and see what happens."

Dick dug his feet firmly into the floor of the creek and took hold of Cyril's feelers. He tugged and tugged and Cyril squirmed and squirmed, not making any other sound because he was trying to be brave although it hurt him very much. Sure enough, after a lot of tugging, the shell began to come off Cyril's head, just like pulling off a tight singlet.

"Ahhhhhhh, that's better," said Cyril.

"That's very much better."

He really did seem relieved.

"What do you do with the shell?" said Dick.

"Oh, just throw it away," said Cyril.

"The tail, next!"

Dick pulled hard and off came the shell from Cyril's tail. Then Dick took the tips of each of the claws in turn, then the tips of the long thin legs and gave all of them a good tug. Off came these coverings, like stockings.

"Well!" said Dick, who couldn't understand it at all. "It's terrible what some people have to put up with. I'm very sorry for you, Cyril."

"Never mind about that now," said Cyril, in a cheerful voice. "I feel splendid now. Oh, how wonderful it is to have a stretch. Hmmm! HMMMMMMM! ... And do you know, Dick, I believe my cold is clearing up, instead of getting worse!"

"I'm so glad," said Dick.

Cyril's little eyes were shining red as rubies in the darkish water. "Won't you join me in my hole in the creekbank for a little refreshment?" he said.

Dick felt tempted to go with Cyril Crayfish to see what he had to eat. But he was rather worried about what had happened to Boska when he hit the water. So he said good-bye to Cyril and began to float upwards. Then he

thought of something and came back.

"Oh, Cyril," Dick said. "I don't suppose you've ever seen a Tasmanian Devil, have you?"

"What? No, I haven't," said Cyril quickly, "and I don't want to, thanks."

"Then you must have heard of them?" said Dick.

"From what I've heard of Tasmanian Devils, they're very nasty, savage animals indeed, as tall as a tree and with two heads and fifty claws and a mouth as big as a fireplace. My mother told me about them. They go after fresh-water crayfishes if they can. You keep away from them, Dick."

"Thank you, Cyril," said Dick. And then he put his foot against a twig, kicked off and swam up through the tea-coloured water to the surface of the creek.

## "METHUSELAH"

Methuselah is the name well suited to the largest marron I've ever laid my eyes on, including those that adorn many bar-room walls throughout the South-west. Like his namesake this fellow was old and barnacled; wise in the ways of men; and no doubt, the leader of his clan.

His story began at about 11 o'clock on one of the cooler evenings in January 1976, when my mate Al and I were relaxing on the banks of Waroona Dam, after a hard day slogging in the sun.

After lighting a roaring logfire, while Al baited the water with chook pellets, I was contentedly sitting back enjoying a well-earned can of lager. Due to our late arrival all other marroners had left the scene and peace reigned supreme ... the eucalypt scent from the trees, wafting through the still night air, complemented the water's surface, which had the appearance of a freshly polished window ... ah, tranquil bliss.

When Al returned from his bait-setting task he whispered in a low, excited key, "O.K. pal, let's go. Get your torch and net. There's plenty of marron in close and you can return to your peace and quiet after the battle C'mon!"

To begin with we caught a few, good ones too they were, though they led us a merry dance before we could fish them out with our scoop-nets. About one hour and twenty marron later we called a break to have a smoke and a cup of medicinal coffee. I sure appreciated the coffee, as by this stage the eyes were feeling heavy, and soon I was wide awake again.

Shortly afterwards we decided to have a last "run" on the baits, before calling it a night. Upon reaching the end of our bait-line we decided to take a wander around the point, on the off-chance of picking up a few more. At this point a high bank projected above a gently shelving shoreline, which extended down into the water. Here we were surprised to see a young kangaroo, lying dead, partly in the water. Don't ask me how it got there as it hadn't been dead for long. Thinking back I assumed it had been placed there by somebody else or had inadvertently stumbled from the high bank in the darkness. It had obviously not been shot as the catchment area is a game reserve, which people respect as such.

It was as if fate had led us to this spot for there were so many marron around the carcass that the bottom was almost obscured by their seething black mass. Unfortunately most of them were undersized though quite a few takeable ones were also chomping away at the carcass. In no time at all we had eight of them stirring noisily in the bucket. Then, just as we were about to give the game away, I came face to face with the biggest, meanest, most gruesome, man-eating monster of a marron either of us had ever seen. His total length, including the claws, must have been 50 cm [20 in].

As this giant picked his way slowly over the silt bottom toward the dead 'roo Al and I just stood there with mouths agape and disbelief in our eyes. Thankfully we had the presence of mind not to shine our torches directly on him as past experience had taught us that larger marron are very wary of bright lights.

While we were discussing our plan of attack Al commented on the marron's likely age and we thought that he was surely as old as the hills, so we decided to name him "Methuselah".

By the time we'd gathered our senses, and decided what to do, our quarry had moved into about 30 cm [12 in] of water, as he advanced towards the 'roo in a slow ponderous way – like a Sherman tank. When he was facing the bank I carefully waded out in a wide circle and came in behind him. It was Al's job to

approach him front-on, with the intention of manoeuvring him into my net, which had a larger gape. Slowly I edged the net towards him while trying to avert his attention with the torch beam, which he appeared most intrigued with.

... But there was no fooling old "Methuselah", as he was wise in the ways of man, and he made an on-the-spot, right angle turn, with his huge, spindly undercarriage. Thus positioned he blasted off like a rocket, leaving both Al and me standing in a cloud of silt. After abusing him with a few choice words we set out to find him again.

After searching for some distance along the bank, to no avail, we decided to let things rest for a while, in the hope that he would return. Ten minutes later we once again approached the 'roo carcass and there was "Methuselah", feeding away as if nothing had happened. This time we were really determined, vowing not to give up until he was ours.

Following a complex battle of tactics, in which we succeeded in keeping him close inshore, we managed to corner him against a large, flat, submerged rock. We closed in quickly, with our nets converging on him. However he wasn't going to fall for this trick as he moved forward, away from the rock and between the two nets. In an attempt to arrest this move I shone the light directly in his eyes. He reacted immediately by darting backwards, bouncing off the rock and right into Al's net ... Alas, the action had been too fast for Al to follow, and as he couldn't believe "Methuselah" was in the net, he attempted evasive action by jumping backwards. As he jumped, Al lost his footing and fell with a resounding splash into the water and although he still had a firm grip on the handle of the net, our prize marron wasn't there anymore.

For the next 20 minutes the still night air echoed with Al's remorse, and believe you me, it took some time to calm him down. Only after he'd thawed out by the fire and sampled a feast of cooked marron, washed down by a few lagers, did he become "normal" Al again!

Finally a word of warning to those who frequent Waroona Dam ... Beware "Methuselah", for to this day he still lurks somewhere in the murky depths.

# THE DAY THE YABBY HAPPENING HAPPENED

" 'S a hottun' Mick," said Zeke.

Mick wasn't quick to reply. He eased his hat back a fraction, rubbed his forehead which was already a mess of sweat-streaked grime and then slowly turned and drawled, "Yer know, I was thinkin' that the first coot who commented how bloody hot it was was gonna get a glass of beer in the kisser!"

"Be a waste o' good beer," retorted Harley, vainly attempting to inject some joviality into the midday moodiness. "Yeah," menaced Zeke, "and it could earn him a knuckle sandwich."

That was the mood that Sunday out there in the scant shade on Barney Berger's Sports Store verandah in the small Victorian country town of Castlebrooke.

It had been a bad summer. Relentlessly hot with the threat of drought and no money in the town, no work. The last job the fellers on the verandah had was baling on Reggie Flintnail's property. Reggie being a notoriously stingy employer of casual labour, and his foreman! How he was hated. Iuan Harddraw, former inmate of Kynedale Prison who developed steely slabs of body muscle and an equally steely contempt toward his fellow men while working on the prison's rock-pile breaking down basalt blocks with a 10 lb [5 kg] sledge-hammer, the resultant metal being used for road paving but that's beside the point. The point is that the wily Flintnail hired this bitter ex-con as foreman knowing that he would prove a no-nonsense slave-driver who would assume the same attitudes towards his underlings as the warders had assumed towards him.

And he did, with a vengeance.

The job was to pick up lucerne bales, heavy wet bales bound in hand-ripping blister-bursting wire and Iuan banned the lads from using the customary gloves which alleviated the wire's worst effects. Iuan said gloves slowed down the job but gloves are for boys is what he implied. Iuan also dispensed with the elevator which lifted the bales onto the truck's tray. "Too slow," he said, but too easy was what he meant. Throwing the bales up onto the truck wreaked havoc on a man's back and it helped the wire wreck hands.

Next job at Flintnail's was even more soul-shattering. Digging a hole for a septic tank and gouging a trench across a couple of hundred yards of sunbaked paddock down to the river for the overflow. Of course Mick plunged the pick through the underground telephone cable while Zeke smashed a water-pipe and when hoisting the septic tank Harley slipped and cracked the concrete casing and Reggie, good chap that he was, never turned a hair. He just deducted the cost from the lad's wages and this, plus the exorbitant tax which the lads reckoned was another of Reggie's diddles (almost worse than the diddle Reg pulled as 'rent' for the rundown fibro hut and soggy mattresses he provided as labourer's lodgings), meant that the lads left the job with very little coin in the pocket.

The silos weren't working casual labourers that year either, the wheat crop having failed although, even broke, the lads did sigh with relief for in such oppressive heat who wanted a back-breaking job raking tons of wheat and choking on lungfuls of powdered wheat dust?

Like I said, that was the mood that Sunday. Morose. Violence could break out as quickly as a bushfire could explode in the tinder-dry scrub surrounding Castlebrooke. The beer didn't help the mood either. The boys were settling down for a dull afternoon's drunken niggling.

Suddenly the early afternoon murmurs were rent with riotous shrieking and laughing and giggling and shouting. Tatterdemalion children marched triumphant from the direction of Dougie Stewart's dam. Barefoot mud-spattered sunburnt kids swinging plastic buckets and carrying dripping hessian bags were herded past Berger's Sports Store by a mob of black buzzing blowflies.

"Hey Dad," yelled the muddiest brat, who happened to be one of Zeke's half-dozen offspring. "The yabbies are really bitin' down at Stewart's dam. We were gettin' six on one line at a time. We got bags full of 'em."

The kids rounded the bend and disappeared from sight but not from sound and, as a parting gesture, left behind half a million blowies which the lads on the porch were now desperately shooing away from their faces.

"He better not be taking those bloody yabbies home," said Zeke. "Stink out the house and we'll never get rid of the blowies."

But Mick said, "Ah come on Zeke, at least the kids are enjoyin' 'emselves."

And Harley added, "Yeah, kids have a knack of enjoying themselves anytime yer know."

"Yerz are right," said Zeke softening, and then a mad gleam came into his eyes. "Ya know what they say . . . if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

"Don't tell me you want to go yabbyin' Zeke? You're a bit long in the tooth for it aren't ya?"

"Be buggered," said Zeke.

"Why not?" said Harley. "Go yabbing I mean."

The trio contemplated the idea for a moment and, with unspoken consensus, they jumped into action. The verandah became a frenzy, what with Mick loping over to the Coolgardie safe singing out, "I got a rabbit here that's gone a bit off . . . be beaut fer bait," and Harley, he was running around breaking up saplings into good lengths to hold the lines, while Zeke dashed into the dusty bowels of Berger's Sports Store, re-emerging with a dozen scoop nets and a hank of twine.

"Listen lads," said Zeke. "Why don't we spread the word. Round up some more blokes, some more booze, the women, even the kids. We'll make a party out of this. Let's make it a party to remember!"

"I'll be in that," seconded Harley, hopping around the verandah like a punch-drunk kangaroo. He was trying to pull on a pair of post-box-red thigh-high wading boots.

"Streuth! Where did you get those things?" asked Mick, and Harley said his sister had brought them back from Taiwan.

"If you reckon the red's rough check out the soles," said Harley proudly, tipping the boots upside down to display the luminous green soles. He added, "Me sister said she was taken in by 'em because they're so gaily coloured."

"Gay gumboots eh Harley?" heckled Mick, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

"Gay or not," said Zeke, "they'll frighten every darned yabby in a 10 mile radius from here."

Anyway, word of the yabby party spread like measles in a children's hostel. All the ladies in town turned up, some carrying empty kero tins because they knew they'd be lumbered with the cooking, and more of the local lads came lugging copious amounts of grog and bags of ice, and all the kids rollicked along to join the fun, bringing the yabbies they'd caught earlier because, as one kid drily commented, "I bet

youse they don't catch any." Ambrose and Mirri, two Aborigines working as sleeper cutters for Vic Rail, turned up too, both bedecked in bold red bandanas and floppy hats, curious to see the 'gubbas' grapple with the yabbies. Mirri came armed with a well-worn guitar and Ambrose was sporting a spanking new piano accordion. Stakes were rammed into the dam's edge, lines were baited with meat, tossed into the water, and the yabbies bit immediately. The party was underway.

By sundown the event was proving to be a snapping success. The catch was excellent, fires had been lit, stoked, and kero tins of yabbies were on the boil. Some diehards, and most of the kids, were still clustered around the dam hauling in yet more yabbies, but most of the men were sitting back under the trees enjoying their beer and singing along to the music provided by Ambrose and Mirri.

Mick and Zeke were standing proudly on a small hillock overlooking the dam, congratulating each other on what a fine rort they'd organised.

"Yep," said Mick, "as a party, 's a beauty."

"Too right," said Zeke. "Best bash since that do we had down the river a while back when Grubber Tate was still skipper of the footy team, when we was raising funds for the new dressing sheds. Remember how old Grubber reckoned he needed to clear his head and took a skinny dip in the river? And remember how he shot out screamin'? There was the biggest, meanest, blackest yabby I've ever seen holdin' tight on his . . ."

"Hang on, mate," said Mick urgently. "What's that floatin' in the middle of the dam? Quick. Shine yer torch on it!"

Zeke switched on his torch and shone it over the dam. There was something floating out there. Something green. At first the two men failed to recognise it. Then they both realised where they'd seen that garish luminous green before . . . on the soles of Harley's flash Taiwanese thigh-high wading boots!

"My God!" whispered Zeke.

"I read about those thigh boots mate," hissed Mick. "They reckon if a man falls into the water with 'em on, air gets trapped in the boots, the bloke in 'em turns upside down and gets . . . drowned."

"Don't stand there babbling man, do something," shouted Zeke, and then turning to the party he yelled, "Help! Harley's in the middle

of the dam drowning!"

Of course the party had reached the stage of drunken mayhem and this emergency call triggered off chaotic confusion. The first man to snap into some semblance of usefulness was the town's greengrocer, Tony Caruso. That was his given name, but in Castlebrooke he was known as 'Ten Ton Tony' because his physical build resembled that of a cow bloated after eating wet lucerne.

"I fix, I getta him out," yelled Tony, running to the dam. It was amazing how high Tony jumped, for a fat man that is. Only trouble was, what his leap attained in height it lacked in length. Tony fell short of the dam, landing in the thick deep mud-sludge where the cattle came down to drink. Tony began to sink as though in quicksand.

Meanwhile, Grundy Harrison, the school's librarian (and the town's only teetotaler) had the presence of mind to run back to Berger's Sports Store, ring the lady at the phone exchange, and tell her to alert the police, the ambulance, and the fire brigade.

Old Joe Bennet, in the prime of his ninety-first summer, was knocked over by a drunken Kelvin Lunn who'd tripped over a bucket of yabbies, and poor old Joe rolled down into the dam. Now he had to be rescued as well as Tony, not to mention Harley. Six grown men were trying to pull 'Ten Ton Tony' out of the mud, and with a sucking slurping sound the mud's suction slowly surrendered the large Italian.

Ambrose got hold of old Joe's leg and hauled him out, but by then young Darcy Duggan had fallen in. He'd been racing around barefoot, and he stumbled into the swarm of yabbies which had been tipped out of the bucket which drunken Lunn had tripped over before he knocked old Bennet into the dam. Half a dozen yabbies latched onto young Darcy's toes. Darcy screamed, danced maniacally trying to disengage them, lost his balance, and splash! In he went.

Mrs Rowlands rescued Darcy. She hiked her dress up, tucked the hem into her knickers, jammed her white bowling hat onto her head, and resolutely waded into the water. She grabbed a spluttering Darcy Duggan by the scruff of his neck and slung him to safety.

None of this helped Harley, but by the time everybody else had been pulled out of the dam the police had arrived. So had the ambulance. And the fire brigade. The various

coloured flashing lights illuminated the scene like a Royal Melbourne Show fireworks display.

Harry Hubble, the fireman, was an amateur scuba diver, and he zipped into the water before you could say "clawed crustaceans". He grabbed the boots and swam back.

"'Fraid they're real heavy," he declared ominously.

Nobody spoke. People gathered around the dam and the only sound you could hear was a communal intake of breath, and Harry's splashing. A second later the silence was broken by a raucous,

"What's goin' on? Don't tell me the yabbies escaped and yer got the police to recapture them?"

Mick and Zeke whirled in the direction of the voice, and what they saw made their eyes boggle.

"H-H-Harley . . . but, but we thought, we saw yer boots in the dam and we thought you'd gone and drowned!"

Harley laughed and hugged Nola, the girl standing next to him. She was blushing as red as a freshly cooked yabby.

"No way mate. I wanted to have a, uh, serious talk to Nola here, but I thought I'd better catch me fair share of yabbies so I rigged up a drop net and used me boots as floaters so I'd know where me net was."

Harley grinned at the astonished onlookers.

"Anyway," he said, "reckon now's as good a time as any to announce me engagement to Nola."

Stunned silence again, broken this time by the "hurrumph hurrumph" of Bluey Field, the local police sergeant.

"Well now," he said, "Fine waste of public money this caper has turned out to be. I should arrest the lot of yer for being drunk while in control of yabbies, but if you give us a good feed I'll forget about it."

Of course nobody forgot that party. It became part of Castlebrooke's colourful history, as did the subsequent party which was held some months later to celebrate Harley and Nola's wedding.

And then not long after that there was another not-to-be-forgotten party turned on by Harley and Nola. A christening party. That party was held in a marquee behind Harley's new house, and during the evening Mick and Zeke

sauntered up to Harley.

"Hey Harley," said Mick. "We've been doing some calculations and we reckon your baby boy was born exactly nine months to the day since you and Nola did that disappearing trick at the yabby party."

Harley inspected his boots, a mite embarrassed.

"Yeah. Nine months since the yabby do. So how's the little nipper then?" said Zeke, nudging Harley in the ribs.

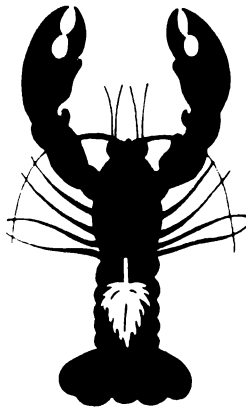
Harley shuffled his feet about a bit, then looked up slyly and said with a grin, "Why do you reckon I called the kid 'Claude'?"

PART 2

*There's Gold in them thar Tails*

**The Yabby**  
**goes**  
**Commercial**





## IN THE BEGINNING . . .

Deep in the heart of the Victorian Mallee, November 1979.

Thud!

The boat jars and the phlegmatic motor coughs to a stuttered death.

It's Casey's fault. Instead of running the punt smoothly alongside the primitive buoy (an empty detergent bottle) marking the spot where the yabby pot lies under the water, and allowing Frank to lean out to one side and push a pole with an attached hook under the buoy to haul in the pot, Casey has run the boat smack-dab over the buoy and has fouled the propeller on the pot's ropes. The result? A loss of time, the loss of the yabby pot, and of course the loss of the yabbies which might have been in the pot.

It's been a long cold night out here on the choppy waters of the remote Mallee swamp graciously named Lake Albacutya (which borders on the Big Desert), and Casey, one of the dozen or so professional yabbiere employed on the lake, has been working his way steadily through a sizeable cache of beer stubbies and if his steering is now somewhat erratic, well-I-I-I, like I said, it's been a long cold night.

And not a very successful night.

Frank, a former marine crayfisherman who switched prey when he heard about the lucrative yabby hauls taken from

this lake during the year, blames it all on the full moon. In between cursing Casey, he says to me: "I dunno why, but it's a bloody fact. The yabbies don't bite on the night of a full moon."

I've been with Frank and Casey since they left the nearby Rainbow pub in mid-afternoon and came down to the lake's edge to prepare for the night's yabbing.

The lake's edge is not a pretty sight even though local tourist authorities promise "one of nature's playgrounds".

The lake, large as it is, is really a swampy overflow from Lake Hindmarsh, and has been caked dry for years. Recently it filled and out of the shallows stoop an untidy mess of drowned skeletal wattle trees which clatter like dried bones in the wind. The 'beach' is a dirty dusty tract scarred with broken-bottle-studded blackened campfire sites, and littered as far as the eye can see with yabby remains. Claws, legs, and body shells by the millions, all burnt to a dozen different hues by the sun — shades of marbled pink, blue, purple, red, and green. It's a yabby's graveyard and it stinks.

Dotted amongst the yabby shards are dead birds, mostly cormorants; shags presumably shot just for the hell of it. Also rotten sheep's heads, putrid plucked

chicken carcasses and wizened fish remains; cast-off yabby bait which now, instead of attracting crayfish, attracts blowflies by the billions.

The blowies took flight momentarily when Casey's kangaroo-bar-bedecked utility slewed onto the beach in a whirl of dust, and then zoomed back to earth, ten million or so diverting and zero-ing in on Casey's ute, and more particularly the metal rubbish-tin full of discarded chicken carcasses Casey had scrounged for bait.

Procuring bait is a constant problem for the professional yabby catchers. They're reluctant to pay good money for bad meat. One yabby pro shipped in a consignment of wild goats from the outback and each night one of the little bleaters is sacrificed to the yabbies.

Bait-wise, Casey has had a good day, for as well as the chicken carcasses, which were originally destined to fill sandwiches in a petrol station roadside diner, Casey also has a bag full of sheep's heads. It's a case of one man's disaster is another man's bait, for the heads belonged to a consignment of sheep which had been in a truck which had overturned on the highway not so far from the roadside diner where a fortnight's worth of the previously mentioned chickens had gone off when the refrigeration failed and the resourceful Casey had gotten wind of (literally?) both bait sources.

Casey lugged the bag of sheep's heads onto the beach and split each in half with an axe, then dismembered the chickens. The legal limit of twenty yabby pots, home-made chicken wire jobs, was baited with a mixture of both baits and then piled into Casey's small but smelly boat — smelly because limp dead yabbies left over from previous night's fishing floated in the inch or so of muck and water in the bottom of the boat and, as any old yabby hand will tell you, **nothing** smells as bad as a dead yabby: a dense, fuggy cloying odour that you sort of have to push away from your face, hoping for a good stiff breeze and knowing that your clothes and skin will bear the taint for days.

Also loaded into the boat was a plastic rubbish bin to hold the catch (some pros use an old refrigerator laid on its back in the boat), a battery attached to an old car headlamp to light the night, a pole to help

pull in the pots, extra bait, oars, life jackets, and the ubiquitous beer stubbies.

Casey (so called because of the Casey-Jones-the-engine-driver cap he constantly wears) rolled up his overalls and pushed the loaded boat off the beach into the shallows.

Frank and I clambered aboard, the small battered outboard motor was fired, revved, and away we puttered across the lake, dropping the pots in a long line, leaving behind us a row of bobbing detergent bottles plotting our progress.

For the remainder of the night, it's a matter of plying backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, every two hours, lifting the pots, checking the pots, removing the catch, rebaiting, tossing the pots back into the water. Arduous, wet, cold work but rewarding if the yabbies are on the bite. Which tonight they're not.

It's late at night as I sit here on the punt's prow while Frank and Casey wrestle with the rope fouling the propeller. I gaze out over the dark waters. Here and there the blackness is pin-pricked with the bright lights of other hopeful yabbiers, and the water's almost silent slap-slap sibilance is frequently fractured with yodelled oaths: "Ya stupid pissed bastard, can't ya steer straight."

Casey isn't the only one who's sought solace in the stubbie. I light a cigarette and think about the historical perspective of it all, in terms of the yabby that is, for as lowly as this business may appear to the casual observer like myself, what we have here is the beginnings of an unusual new financial fillip to the rural sector; the founding yabby industry is being pioneered while I'm sitting in this boat. Yabbies fished from this lake tonight will appear at Footscray Fish Market next week. But next month? Next year?

Perhaps the world.

Perhaps Paris, Stockholm and New Orleans will be hosts to the swarms of yabbies lurking beneath this boat. Forget the Mallee root; the Mallee yabby's the new marvel. Ride the yabby's back, onward, to a healthy new export trade. Ding-a-ling-ling, the international cash registers will ring. Rolls of kronor, francs and dollars will filter through the world's banks to end up lining



Professional yabbiers about to begin a day's fishing at Lake Albacutya.

the pockets of the doughty chaps who spend their nights chasing the yabbies on Lake Albacutya.

Oh yes! The word is out that the yabby yields big money, and that the money could get bigger in the near future. Folk around here **know** that European crayfish connoisseurs can't wait to get our yabbies into their cooking pots. Ask anyone in the Mallee and they'll tell you. The yabby business? It's a case of all demand and not enough supply. The skilled yabbiers who do some of the supplying earn \$300 or so a night, \$1000 in a good week, and there's plenty of amateurs trying to claw their way into the yabby supply business. In fact, it's almost become a mania.

This year's Albacutya yabby harvest has been a record harvest. For some unknown reason the yabbies are so prolific in this newly filled lake that they travel across the bottom in swarms, rather than establishing their own territory as yabbies

normally do. And unlike other yabbies, these yabbies didn't hibernate. The professionals have been able to work all year round but they've been hampered by crowds of eager amateurs.

Easter 1979 was a scene of yabby madness on the lake. One fisherman claimed that he'd never seen anything like it. Visitors couldn't find campsites for three kilometres, and at night the lake was a mass of lights. The area was a fever of total confusion. People were running over each other's pots, losing pots, getting confused about whose pots were whose, pinching other people's pots, all manner of skulduggery was going on. That's apparently what caused the shooting, although no one had had their head blown off.

After Easter '79, local newspapers began to speak of beer and frothing on the lake. Violence among yabbiers. Terms such as 'The Great Yabby War', 'The Yabby

Rustlers', and 'Yabby Prosecutions' were coined. The news even travelled down to the big smoke. The Melbourne Sun reported:

*"Professional fishermen say yabbie rustlers are raiding their pots at one of Victoria's biggest inland lakes . . .*

*"A Horsham fisherman . . . said spot-lighters used powerful boats to sneak onto the lake at night and steal the catch.*

*" 'They wait for us to go to bed at night,' he said. 'But some even raid the pots in broad daylight.'*

*"A small group of professionals are camped at Lake Albacutya and are harvesting yabbies . . . The fisherman said it provided a livelihood except when rustlers were in action."*

The Horsham Mail Times reported the matter in more ominous tones and quoted one fisherman as saying:

*"We're fed up with these blokes pinching our livelihood . . . If we catch them there won't only be yabbies on the bottom of the lake."*

What the papers neglected to report was that there had been shooting amongst the Albacutya yabbiere. A pro told me:

*"That bloody . . . pulled a gun on the bank manager from Sea Lake. He should have been jailed over it. He pulled a gun on the manager and his mates and the local copper gave him a real serve.*

*"A mob from Sea Lake were over here and they were just going around the lake trying to find somewhere to put their bloody gear in, there was stuff everywhere, and they were travelling along past . . . 's gear. He flew straight out with a gun. This bloke, the bank manager, he'd only been in Sea Lake for a few weeks, and he nearly dropped dead on the spot. I think he'd just come from the city, from Melbourne, but pulled a gun on him.*

*"There's been a fair few shots fired on the lake over yabbies. I was talking to some blokes from Woomelang the other day; farmers, there was a mob of them camped up here between the toilet block and the point, back in March-April '79, there was about six of 'em, and their wives were all in the caravan while they were sitting around the campfire at night and they seen somebody workin' their bloody pots so they swung the bloody spotlight out. They had a rifle and they fired eight or ten shots straight out over the blokes workin' their pots and the bloody boat took off and it didn't come back again. It*

*beats me how somebody hasn't been skittled. She's a unique lake but there's some bloody thieving mongrel bastards on it."*

The wrangling and the rustling was the result of a 'feud' between the amateur and professional yabbiere, each group resenting the other group's claim to Albacutya's yabby riches, although often the distinction between amateur, professional and rustler was a line about as thin as a yabby's antenna. Amateurs made money 'on the side' by illegally hawking yabbies around the local hotels. Some amateurs fished their own yabbies, and others fished the professionals' pots while the professionals, given the chance, would gladly rob amateurs or even plunder fellow professionals' hauls. The hard-core rustlers didn't discriminate — they zipped about on the lake robbing anyone who could be robbed.

Publicly, the line of demarcation was drawn between the amateurs backed by the local councils who welcomed the tourism, and the small group of professionals who acted on their own behalf and were mostly a law unto themselves. The situation simmered to a surly stand-off until early July '79 when the professionals formed an unlikely alliance. Politics, they say, makes strange bedfellows but so too does professional yabbing, for the pros received protection from the Victorian government.

On July 5, the Fisheries and Wildlife Division announced new laws that proved to be good news and bad news for the amateurs. The good news was that amateurs no longer had to hold a fishing licence in order to fish for yabbies with a drop net or handline! This came as a shock to most yabbiere because none had realised that, technically speaking, since 1971 anyone catching yabbies had to have a fishing licence, not that the law had ever been in force and consequently the announcement that this law was no longer law was, as they say in the bush, "no big deal".

But the bad news was a big deal — amateur yabbiere were "no longer allowed to use yabby or freshwater crayfish pots". Lake Albacutya was specifically referred to in the new legislation, and on the lake yabby pots were the best method of catching yabbies. The Warracknabeal Herald

reported the news on July 10 and commented:

*"They giveth and they taketh. There's going to be a stink over this."*

Sure enough there was. The Dimboola Promotion Council held a meeting and agreed that "the new regulations would drastically reduce the number of tourists who liked to spend a weekend at these lakes."

The committee announced it would protest to the Dimboola Shire Council, the Victorian Premier, and the Minister of Conservation under whose department the Fisheries and Wildlife Division operated.

The Dimboola Shire Council rallied quickly to the call. A meeting was held and the council came out strongly against those cursed professionals who, the council felt, had conspired with the state government. Said the Shire President:

*"It's a disgrace that professional fishermen can come hundreds of miles and take hundreds of yabbies. They leave nothing."*

Councillor Merv Wundersitz rejoined that professionals did leave something — 'rubbish'. Councillor Bill Newcombe said it was a "bit rough" that amateurs couldn't use pots. Councillor Syd Drendel on the other hand wanted to know where the regulations came from. He said it was the most ridiculous legislation that had been through parliament. It had been proved, so he claimed, that yabbies were one of the biggest tourist attractions for the shire. He wanted to know why amateurs shouldn't be allowed to have a pot or two for their own enjoyment.

Warracknabeal journalist Ray Jolley had an idea why the councillor's yabby enjoyment was being hampered. He believed that somewhere along the line there had been a fair bit of pressure brought to bear by conservationists. Jolley predicted meddlesome doom and gloom in an article in the Warracknabeal *Herald*. He claimed the conservationists' plot would result in the Albacutya area being taken over by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. He forecast that camping would be restricted, and that no longer would visitors be able to pick their own camping spot away from the

madding crowd. He even went so far as to predict that campers would be designated a spot to camp and would not be allowed to camp anywhere else.

Worse still, according to Jolley, was that Fisheries and Wildlife officers would be there in full force to make sure the new yabby regulations were being enforced. Perhaps the most serious claim Jolley made was that **the regulations would tend to make criminals out of people whose only crime would be that they wanted a feed of yabbies.**

Jolley concluded his report on an emotive high; saying that several people had already suggested a petition on the matter, and that was tried once hoping to get good TV reception, however, it came to very little. Jolley also maintained the rights of country people were being whittled away by regulations such as these, without even a yelp.

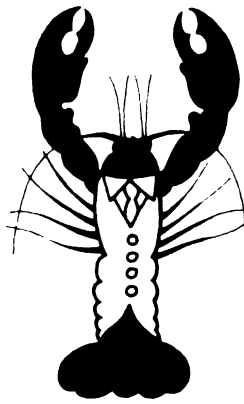
The Member for the North Western Province, Mr Ken Wright, weighed in and criticised the Ministry of Conservation for what he termed an "amazing about-face". Mr Wright claimed he'd discussed the regulations when they first loomed imminent in February 1979. He said he was then assured by the Minister of Conservation that the new regulations would "remove entirely the limitation on the amount of gear yabby fishermen may use".

Following Mr Wright's attack, the Ministry of Conservation despatched members of the Fisheries Management Committee to the trouble spot, and a special conference was conducted at Horsham. The surprise of the meeting was that professional yabblers attended and supported the right of amateurs to use pots. One professional said the restrictions had caused ill feelings toward pros; that the council had troubled the men, and that if amateurs did not get the use of pots, they would continue to raid pots belonging to the professionals.

A spokesman for the Fisheries Management Committee agreed the new regulations had 'failed', and a motion was carried that the government would be recommended to rewrite the laws, allowing amateurs the use of three yabby pots.

The talk of updated laws seemed to please the yabbing populace, not that

anybody was actually going to obey the laws, old, new, rewritten or otherwise. To keen yabbiars, yabbing is a God-given right far removed from mere mortal mandates and professional sanctions. However, it is reassuring for yabbiars to realise that the laws not being observed are at least reasonable laws.



## TALKING TO THE PROFESSIONAL YABBY CATCHERS

Not surprisingly, professional yabblers are a rather odd lot. Few professionals specialise in yabbies alone. Most are independent bush hustlers, by necessity adaptable and ready to 'have a go' at whatever's going. Many pros supplement their yabby incomes with other forms of fishing, and some hold professional shooter's licences, usually dealing in foxes and kangaroos. These pursuits can be compatible — a fox skin is sold but its head goes into the yabby pot as bait.

One yabby pro, Steve Buck, of wherever he is at the moment, described his involvement in the business:

*"I was what you call a professional yabby catcher for over six months. I worked along the Darling River in Wilcannia in north-central New South Wales. Having spent many years in the outback, mainly as a professional fox shooter, this yabby business was certainly new to me. When I first arrived in Wilcannia in 1978 I could not help but notice that everyone had gone mad on yabbies. They were on sale everywhere, in the hotels and cafés, even the Aborigines were selling them to tourists. There were stories told in the bars of how a person could make \$600 a week when the yabbies were on the run. I wanted to give it a go but never had the necessary finance to buy nets or a boat. I did eventually meet a businessman from Sydney*

*who had spent some months of the year on the yabbies as a sideline business interest. He had over two hundred nets and a 12 ft [4 m] aluminium punt and a 10 h.p. [7.5 kW] outboard. He was going back to Sydney so I agreed to take over for him. I can remember my first day on the river when I got 13 kilos [30 lb]. It must be realised that it was coming on winter then and the yabbies were starting to go in the mud. It was by no means an easy job. All those nets had to be baited and put into the river for about an eight-mile [13-km] stretch. I used to shoot a roo, which I was led to believe was the best bait, and cut it up to bait all the traps in the morning. Then, by the time I had finished putting the traps in the river, I would go back to my first trap and work my way back up the river to empty the yabbies from the traps. I tried quite a number of baits. To mention some: roo meat, a skun snake, black crow, wild pig, sheep's heads, and most surprisingly one of the best baits was skun fox heads. One trap with a fox head in it was so full of yabbies that it took all my strength to get it up from the bottom and into the boat.*

*"For all the time I was there, no one called me by my name. I was always called 'Yabby Man'. I was even the inspiration for the **Yabby Man** serial which ran in the local newspaper. I heard mothers telling their kids that they were allowed to come up the river for a ride with the Yabby Man.*



*"Once I got to know the lurks my bags were getting better and 30–40 kg [65–90 lb] was an average day's catch. I wrote a song about my yabbing days called 'I'm the Yabby Man from Olary Town'. Later, the river started to flood. This caused nets to be lost, or snagged up in logs carried down the river so I gave the yabbing away."*

Before he retired from the yabbies, Steve nearly lost his boat twice. Once when someone bent on sabotage untied it from its moorings, and once when he discovered an angry snake in the boat. While trying to kill the snake, he overturned his boat. Many of his nets were stolen but the final blow was an altercation with local police over certain matters which don't bear going into here.

Another character who worked the outback yabby trail was Gary Helm. He hoped the yabbies might put an end to his track record of disaster. In 1975 Helm said he hoped to produce between 180 and 200 tonnes (tons) of yabbies for the South Australian export market — yabbies were cooked, packed, and sent to Scandinavia in tonnes. Helm ran into trouble when he first set up in the yabby business. The jinx continued to dog his path:

*"I remembered the yabby from my days in the Mallee and I decided to come after them with George Smith who fished shark for me in Western Australia.*

*"The annabranche of the Darling River, what is now part of the Menindee Lake scheme, was the supplier of yabbies for as long as anybody could remember. That's where we went first and we hardly saw one. A whole season didn't produce enough yabbies for a feed*

*"Then it was rumoured there were yabbies in water about 100 miles [160 km] north of Broken Hill, so up we went to talk to the locals. It turned out to be true, and our whole operation was geared to this type of water — water that has never been linked to a permanent water-course such as a river or creek*

*"Over the next three months we had a look at fifty such rain catchments in the north-west section of New South Wales and without exception they carried yabbies. On one property we took 37 000 lb [17 000 kg] of yabbies from what was little more than a puddle. In another rain-filled depression that hadn't had water in it for a hundred years we were getting out yabbies*

*that were 3 in [8 cm] longer than a standard-size beer bottle. In the peak of a season we averaged 20 000 lb [9100 kg] a week — that's 140 000 yabbies."*

Having found the yabbies, Helm set about getting them to market. He set up base in a disused petrol station in Dareton, New South Wales, and spent about \$80 000 renovating the station, buying freezing equipment and refrigerated trucks. His operational area extended east and west of Broken Hill and up to the Queensland border. The yabbies were sent to Millicent, South Australia, to be packed for export. But that was back in '75 — just before the yabby export market crashed as suddenly and viciously (for anyone who had invested in yabbies) as the nickel explorer Poseidon.

Lake Albacutya emerged as the centre of the yabby business in late 1976 and the pros drifted in. Some came from the former South Australian boom lake, Lake Alexandrina, others came from the Murray River, a couple from outback New South Wales, and the rest were locals.

One of the most enterprising local yabbers is Mr Fred Fry, proud proprietor of Big Nipper Yabbies. Fred takes the yabbies very seriously indeed and is experimenting with commercial cultivation in more than a hundred farm dams he has set aside for the purpose. While waiting for his dams to bear yabbies, Fred Fry fishes Lake Albacutya and is proving a dab hand at the business of netting profits from the wild yabby.

Fred is a strong healthy man with a very independent nature. He's most enthusiastic about his unusual career, and he's one of the best-equipped yabbers on the lake. His prize possession is what resembles an air-conditioned country dunny on wheels. This is his mobile chiller, a metal insulated 'box' complete with a home air-conditioning unit which enables him to freeze his catch, keeping his yabbies in a chilled comatose state until he cooks them or transports them to market.

Fred's quite keen to introduce his yabbies to visiting celebrities and among his 'converts' are singers Johnny Chester and Diana Trask. Another of Fred's prize possessions is a giant Tasmanian crayfish claw which Johnny Chester presented to him after a successful 'do' in Swan Hill.



Professional yabbier Fred Fry in the chiller he uses to store his catch.

Fred's learned that there's money in talking about yabbies as well as catching them. He's one of a growing number of yabby consultants who, for a fee, advise would-be yabby farmers what **not** to do. He's listed as a 'resource person' by the Hawkesbury Agricultural College, which conducts an annual Freshwater Crayfish School, and occasionally he gives lectures. When I confronted him, he agreed to be interviewed only if I guaranteed not to attempt to glean his yabby secrets. Then we squatted beside his natty chartreuse Ford Fairlane, in the shade of his chiller, and chatted about how he'd been chasing yabbies for 'bloody years'. It was the normal thing up in the Mallee, he said. It was the ideal environment for yabbies because of the warm climate. Professional yabbing had only been going on there for a couple of years. There were ten or twelve professional yabbers working the lake and Fred's outfit put 3¼ tonnes (tons) through the Victorian market early in 1979.

Fred views the future of professional yabbing with some trepidation. The business, he says, is in danger of being 'rooted up' by mercenary middlemen, avaricious amateurs and unethical fellow professionals. For starters, Lake Albacutya's yabby stock needs management. Egg-bearing females, or berried females as they're known in the trade, should not be taken.

"There's millions of yabbies with eggs on them in this lake," says Fred. "I don't know whether there's eggs on any of these in me chiller here."

He opens his chiller. One large angry yabby, intent on escape, threatens him with its claws. "Get out you bugger . . . you'll soon give the job up," says Fred, flicking the yabby back. He picks up a chilled yabby which appears dead and says, "See, they're just chilled. Now you watch. Put him out in the sun and away he goes. This is the value of my chiller."

We squat watching the comatose yabby. Moments later it begins to wriggle, then snaps its tail vigorously and marches away.

*"Away he goes [says Fred]. Anyway, I don't think there are many females in here. I never noticed many when I was pulling them in. Gee, last week the yabbies here were just covered with berries. Got a terrific amount of big females out here and I don't get that in any of my dams. See, there's hardly any berries on these females, but last week there were thousands with eggs. I was grading all mine out, even a lot of females without eggs. I was chucking 'em all out and then I found out everybody else was taking the whole lot. Well, I was only being a fool to myself. I was throwing up to five bags a day back in in February-March. But these buggers that are in it for a quick quid, that's the problem, and they're glutting the market, putting rubbish in. You see, I'm in his business for ever and a day because I'm interested in yabbies. I'm in the job for yabbing. Some of these yabbers, all they want to do is sit around and drink piss all day. Then there's the middlemen. Those rotten cows make more money than I do*

*"The other day there at the Melbourne market there was two blokes who bought a whole heap of live yabbies at 80 cents per kilo [40 cents per lb] and I said to them 'That's bloody ridiculous, there's no way we can harvest them at that price.' They weren't my yabbies.*

they belonged to mates who work alongside me on the lake. These blokes buying the yabbies said 'But we only get \$4.80 a kilo [\$2.40 a lb] and we have to cook them.' But it takes five minutes to cook the bastards and here they're getting \$4.80 for the kilo! Oh, those middle mongrels . . . Oh no, it's wrong. And now, with the restaurants, I used to supply them direct, well just recently one bloke told me that the bloody French . . . I think it was the French restaurants (they're great yabby blokes the French, you know), anyway these restaurants formed a sort of association and they go to the suppliers and say 'Right, we'll give you such-and-such for all the yabbies you can supply' and they're buying up the markets everywhere and affecting the price."

To add to Fred's problems, he's been plagued by the notorious yabby rustlers but he claims most of the rustlers are renegade pros.

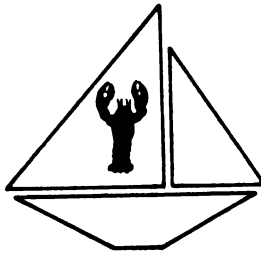
"I'll tell you about the rustlers. There are blokes out there now where I'm set and they were going around Bobby Poole's pots. Bobby's from Swan Hill and when he gets back he'll kill the bastards if he catches them. He's a wild boy, a wild boy. Used to be a professional fighter. He caught three lots doing my pots over about three weeks ago. For a week or so I was saying to him, 'I'm being done over out there in the centre,' I said, 'because me markers that you can't see real well, those pots have got plenty of yabbies in them, but me big white ones that you can see easily, they're all empty.' Bobby said 'Oh no, no, the yabbies just aren't in your pots.' Anyhow about two weeks later I got down here early and Bobby said 'Oh, I caught a bloody pro from Swan Hill going over your pots at half-past-two in the morning.' Bobby got right after him and he said 'You bloody thieving mongrels, we're going to stay up all night watching for you, you bastard.' 'Oh, go to bed Bobby,' he said. 'We won't touch ya pots.' The lying bastards.

"So my wife was over and we went out to work the pots that night. Well, we'd been lifting 110 – 120 lb [40 – 50 kg] a morning but at 10.30 that night lifted 180 lb [82 kg], and we came back in the morning and lifted 170 lb [80 kg] so that mongrel . . . See, the yabbies only go for bait at certain times of night, so that mongrel was working our pots right up until the time he knew they were going off. He'd leave it so that we were getting enough in our pots not to know what was going on while he was skimming most

of our yabbies. Bloody mongrel. Apart from catching them there's not much you can do about it. Can't do much when you do catch the bastards either. I was watching a couple of blokes with my binoculars and would you believe one of them is supposed to be the representative of the professional yabbies! I saw them take 200 lb [90 kg] of my yabbies, so I went in to the copper and he's no bloody help, he's a dead loss. 'Aw you bloody professional bastards,' he says, and next thing he's carrying on about my boat registration. I didn't have my registration numbers in properly, they only issue the numbers once a year and although I was paid for I never had my numbers so the cop said 'Oh, that's a brummy thingo, yer registration', so I came back to the lake here. I hadn't told anybody that I'd been knocked off, or what I was doing about it, yet when I come back everybody knew and these blokes had their story worked out about a bloody mix up."

While Fred's got a lot to say about rustlers, the mere mention of the word 'amateurs' almost renders him speechless:

"Oh, bloody . . . oh . . . those amateurs. This is what bugs me. Now up here this morning there's an amateur and he must have seventy or eighty pots in. Now that's bloody ridiculous. Pros only have bloody twenty. By the news this morning amateurs are only entitled to three pots and as many drop nets as they like. Well see they're not satisfied with that and they're taking so many yabbies that they're throwing them out. They're throwing out good yabbies! It's just a waste. I know buggers, friends mind you, that have been here and taken six or eight bags of yabbies and I said 'Look, you'll have to cook them or something.' No they . . . 'Oh bullshit, we'll take 'em home,' they say and they get home and they've one bag left that's any good and the rest have to be thrown away. Oh no, it's greedy amateurs who are really going to root the whole show up. They couldn't give a bugger about what happens to the yabbies."



## THE DAY THE FIRST YABBY EXPORT BOOM WENT BUST

Wellington is a quaint historic town, a famous river crossing and nineteenth-century police post tucked away on the banks of the Murray River's lower reaches in south-east South Australia. To get to the township you cross the Murray on a creaking punt which chuffs through flocks of yawning pelicans. Once the punt has moored you drive up a hill on a rutted road running between a clutch of time-eroded colonial buildings, and then you reach a point where the roadside is littered with fallen, or falling down, signs: "Yabbies For Sale", "Live Yabbies Here". Some signs as large as a city billboard, forming a detritus which records the high-water mark of Australia's first yabby export boom. Having reached a premature peak here, the yabby shebang began to ebb, and then suddenly slid back into the Murray, leaving behind only a few newspaper headlines, some battered bank balances, and these hoardings.

It's significant too that most of the detritus surrounds Barney Weidenhoffer's home for Barney has the distinction of being the first, and the last, president of the South Australian Freshwater Crayfish Pool, also known as the "Yabby Pool". Barney no longer makes his living off the yabbies, but he's still employed by the river — he fishes

commercially for callop, or yellow-belly, and he's the organ player on the **Murray River Queen**, the tourist riverboat.

Talking to Barney about his former occupation as a yabbier, it's obvious that his heart isn't really in the subject any longer. It would be, if only . . . if only the yabbies were there for the taking like they once were.

"Tell me about the yabby export pool," I say, but Barney says nothing. He looks out his window, over the Murray River, and I sense his mind has travelled back to 1973, the official beginning of it all, the first annual meeting of the Crayfish Pool held at the Riverside Hotel, Tailm Bend. And what a meeting it was. Well-attended with about twenty fishermen and their wives, local M.P. Mr I.A. Wardle, Mr H. Fairbanks representing the Minister of Fisheries, and Mr Milan Rapp and his wife, proprietors of Ocean Foods Pty. Ltd., the Adelaide seafood company which held the first contract to supply Scandinavia with Australian yabbies.

The function began with a minute's silence in memory of the late 'Sharkey' Head and Peter Laurie, two local fishermen who died in separate accidents during the year. And then Mr T.A. Weidenhoffer, as he was designated that night, gave his historic speech:

"The export market for yabbies was not achieved overnight. It is the result of about two years' planning and investigation. Many years ago, yabbies were of no commercial value. Fishermen who were then fishing for callop and cod used to set a few pots occasionally and give their catches to their friends. I believe the first to catch and sell yabbies was the late Mr Frank Storch and a little later, one of our members, Mr Cliff Darling. This was ten or fifteen years ago.

"As the scale fish disappeared, more fishermen started catching and cooking yabbies. This soon glutted the local auction market, and they were forced to pack and sell their catch at hotels in the city and country as far away as Renmark. This increased the popularity of the yabby but it meant more work for both the fishermen and their wives.

"I believe catching is one job, while processing and marketing is another.

"I first met Mr Milan Rapp at an AFIC meeting in Adelaide, both of us being delegates. I sold him some tench for cray bait. A visit by a French chef (André Simon, 1964), and his statement in the press that the yabby and the mud crab of Queensland were the 'most underrated' of our delicacies, roused much interest in an

overseas market. I mentioned this to Mr Rapp and many others. Mr Rapp showed some interest and he said he would try and do something about it. I remember him phoning me one night, urgently requesting a dozen live yabbies by 10 a.m. next morning. He had learned of a French ship, with a chef on board, and a dozen of our yabbies were cooked on board in a special way. Similar exercises were carried out with samples flown to many parts of the world. Finally it was learned that the Scandinavian countries were the best markets, but they wanted them cooked in a special way. This resulted in Mr Rapp going overseas to learn the cooking technique.

"There were many problems. They did not want the really large yabbies. They could only be sold for six weeks a year from a date in August. These problems were overcome after several meetings with some of the fishermen and Mr Rapp. By this time it was generally known that there was a market overseas and several processors were showing interest. There were several meetings with other processors, but finally it was agreed by all present at a meeting at the Wellington Hotel that they would supply Ocean Foods Pty. Ltd. The yabbies were to be



A carton of yabbies packed for export to Sweden.

picked up alive in chiller vans at various points. It was then decided to form an organisation known as the 'Export Yabby Pool'.

"I believe our first year has been a grand success. The yabby is now upgraded and, with good management, I see bigger and better things ahead. In closing this first annual report, I am sure that the formation of the pool is the greatest step inland fishery has taken. It has stabilised the local market. All fishermen are getting more for their catch, no matter where they sell. The yabby has been upgraded and we are a recognised body."

The yabby boom was officially on, and fishermen flocked to nearby Lake Alexandrina, netting huge hauls — individual catches of up to 300 lb (140 kg) a day were reported. Advertisements particularly slanted to the new yabbiere began appearing in South Australian newspapers, selling boats, outboard motors and other yabby gear.

The yabbies were taken to Ocean Foods' processing plant in Exeter, South Australia, and graded. Small yabbies, 16—22 per kg [2 lb] were set aside for the Swedish market, cooked to Swedish specifications with dill (specially grown by Ocean Foods), and packaged in bold blue and red cartons labelled *Australiska Kraftor Djupfrysta* — Australian deep-frozen yabbies. Ocean foods shipped 25 tonnes (tons) of yabbies to Sweden in 1973; in 1974, 40 tonnes (tons). By 1975 other companies, and other countries, were getting into the act. In June 1975 the **Australian** reported:

#### PARISIANS RAVE ABOUT OUR YABBIES

"Frogs legs and snails are not enough for Parisian gourmets: the latest craze is Australian yabbies.

"They are being shipped live out of Adelaide in special wet packs at the rate of 3 tonnes a week.

"Mr Odd Boegh, South Australian manager of LEP Air Services Pty. Ltd., said his company was finding it difficult to keep up with the demand.

"The weather here is bad and our fishermen are not bringing in big hauls," he said.

"We sent five shipments over as an experiment and they sold so well we now have a contract with the Paris fish markets. Our biggest problem was finding a direct flight from Adelaide

to Paris. The French like to buy yabbies live so they can cook them as they like . . ."

"[Mr Boegh] said supplies would increase greatly in summer when yabbies were more prolific."

Ocean Foods' export figure for 1975 was 115 tonnes (tons). An impressive figure, but not impressive enough for the Swedes who were expecting 700 tonnes (tons) a year. Yet, there was still hope for Ocean Foods to make a mint by boiling yabbies in dill. After all, the 1973 tonnage was almost doubled in 1974, and the 1975 tonnage virtually trebled the 1974 figure, but in 1976 Ocean Foods' yabby export figure was nil tonnage!

Absolutely zilch.

Australia's total yabby catch has never since reached those dizzy 1975 heights. For example, the most recent figures available at the time of writing show that 33 tonnes (tons) of yabbies were commercially taken in 1977—78.

What happened to the yabby export boom? Helen Rapp of Ocean Foods said the Scandinavians have Turkey and Yugoslavia as their primary suppliers now. The Australian 'kraftor' supplemented these imports but could not match them. In 1975 the yabby population decreased in South Australia, the markets in Scandinavia were inundated by the Turkish and Yugoslavian imports, and the Australian yabby simply could not keep up.

I asked Barney Weidenhoffer the same questions. He still seems a bit stunned by it all. He said the top seasonal catch of 300 lb (135 kg) a day levelled out to 150 lb (70 kg) a day. Then suddenly it went down to 30 lb (14 kg), and a few weeks later it was 10 lb (4.5 kg) or less.

Barney takes me to some sheds behind his house. He shows me a huge roll of chicken wire and explains that the yabby catch had dropped so suddenly that wire he'd bought to make more pots had become redundant before he even had time to begin making them and here he was still stuck with the wire.

As to why the yabbies disappeared, Barney isn't quite sure. He doesn't agree with the popular notion that they were simply fished out. He feels the introduction of carp had something to do with it. Yabbies are prolific in Lake Alexandrina because of

**ANOTHER MILESTONE IN AUSTRALIAN EXPORTS**

***WORK IN THE FISHING INDUSTRY OF LAKES  
AREA FOR THE YABBY FISHERMEN***

# OCEAN FOODS

M. RAPP



**AUSTRALIA CAN DELIVER THE GOODS**

***Packed in hygienic conditions for the export market.***

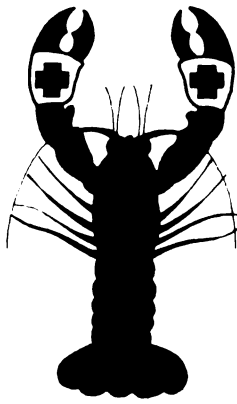
A reminder of the halcyon days of an expanding export business in the early 1970s.

the dense growth of weed on the lake floor, and carp destroy this cover.

"But there's one thing I can't help thinking about," Barney said, "and that was something that happened at the first yabby export meeting. There was this little old fellow up the back of the room and all of a sudden he popped up and asked 'What if the yabby catch goes bad?'

"He was talking about this thing of yabby cycles, good years and bad years, that there's good seasons followed by bad seasons. I didn't take any notice of him ... then!"





## THE GREAT EUROPEAN CRAYFISH PLAGUE AND OTHER HORRORS

Ironically, the not-yet exploited potential of the Australian yabby export market exists only because the traditional European crayfish producing countries were beset with disaster. Problems associated with the natural fluctuations of wild crayfish populations are small fry to European crayfishermen; what the Europeans couldn't contend with was the devastating outbreak of a virulent crayfish plague.

European countries which once exported crayfish now have to import to satisfy domestic needs. For example Sweden, in 1905, exported 90 tonnes (tons) of freshwater crayfish. Three years later this figure dropped to 30 tonnes (tons). The plague had arrived in Sweden. Soon after the export industry was destroyed and Sweden has been a crayfish importer ever since. In 1976 the Swedes imported 2000 tonnes (tons) of crayfish, valued at \$US3.2 million.

The crayfish plague which wrecked the Swedish industry, and has ravaged Europe for more than a century, is still present. There is no cure. Although the plague first appeared in northern Italy in 1860, it wasn't until 1936 that the cause was identified — a fungus, **Aphanomyces astaci**, which attacks only crayfish, quickly killing them. The disease can be spread by

crayfish or transmitted by humans, attaching itself to clothing and fishing gear.

It is believed that the plague was introduced from a batch of imported American crayfish. Some of the dominant U.S. crayfish species carry the fungus naturally, but are immune to its effects. Major European species have proven 'over susceptible' to the fungus as is, incidentally, the Australian yabby. If the plague is ever introduced to Australia the yabby will in all probability become extinct.

Once established in Italy the plague spread rapidly, but erratically, through Europe. French crayfish were next to be destroyed, then German crayfish. In 1880 the epizootic calamity ruined Austria's finest crayfish waters. Austrian astacologist Reinhardt Spitzzy wrote:

*"Every time I visit crayfish waters to inquire after stock the information is almost always depressing. There can be no doubt that the crayfish plague is intensified by mass tourism and Austria is a land of tourism"*

*"The Austrian population accepted the dying-out of the crayfish as God-given. The present generation knows little of crayfish as a delicacy and nothing of the important factor of the biological balance in the waters, where the crayfish is irreplaceable as a health inspector and controller of frogs and underwater plants."*

*Without thinking, people are decimating the last crayfish stocks by introducing eels and swans."*

Yugoslavia, Poland and Russia next fell victim to the plague, and in 1907 it travelled from Russia to Sweden. In 1910 the plague infected the famous Swedish crayfish lake Hjalmanen, where five million crayfish were caught annually. The plague exterminated the lake's crayfish and went on to destroy more than 50 per cent of Swedish crayfish waters.

As recently as 1971 the plague invaded Norway. To check its progress electrical barriers were placed across the rivers in its path, killing the contaminated crayfish but not stopping the plague. Eighteen months later the plague had jumped the barriers and a sort of cat-and-plague game has ensued since, with the Norwegians shifting barriers, restricting the transportation and catching of crayfish, but to no avail. The epizootic seems unstoppable.

The June 1977 issue of **Fish Farming International** reported:

*"The plague was economically disastrous to thousands of families obtaining most of their income from crayfish and it changed the ecosystems of waters previously kept clean by the omnivorous scavengers."*

Most European countries have abandoned their indigenous crayfish to its be-plagued fate. The only solution is to replace the vulnerable European species with American crayfish which have developed immunity. The European crayfish seems doomed to go the way of the dodo. French researcher Marcel Cabantous claims the French are faced with the complete disappearance of their natural crayfish. Few places are presently not contaminated by the crayfish plague. He believes it is necessary to introduce juveniles which are resistant to the crayfish plague to re-establish the population.

The Swedes have initiated an intensive programme of crayfish restoration using a laboratory-bred crayfish advertised as the Simontorp Crayfish. This is a west coast American crayfish, **Pacifastacus leniusculus**, or signal crayfish, which was first introduced to Sweden in 1969. An Austrian crayfish expert said that at the time the Swedes were only gradually revealing



A 'berried' Simontorp female displaying a clutch of roe.

their discovery and were keeping it as secret as the Coca Cola company keep their recipe.

The crayfish are now bred and hatched at AB Simontorp's Aquatic Breeding Laboratory at Blentarp, Sweden, and when two weeks old the crayfish are sold to European farmers. A glossy brochure, resembling a pamphlet for Swiss watches, catalogues the benefits of the laboratory crayfish:

*"The Simontorp Crayfish grows rapid and acquires larger claws, more meat, a greater weight than the European forest crayfish. Experience of introducing various Simontorp crayfish in many waters has shown that it is a viable and well adapted occupant of the ecological niche left vacant when the native crayfish has been wiped out by the plague, which it is resistant."*

Plague isn't the only problem European crayfisheries face. Pollution and interference with natural water systems help rid waterways of any crayfish spared by the plague. Europeans, if they wish to continue eating crayfish, must overcome these problems and restock their waters with commercial quantities of crayfish because it seems unlikely that the importation of ready-to-eat crayfish will ever satisfy the European market.

Countries such as Australia, where the industry is in its infancy, cannot

guarantee large enough and regular supplies. Crayfish exporters such as Turkey are at the mercy of political instability and the two major producers of crayfish, Russia and the U.S.A., rarely export. Russia has the world's largest annual crayfish haul, comprising 50—55 per cent of the world's total catch, yet only a small percentage of Russian crayfish are exported. The most rapidly growing crayfish producer, the U.S.A., also retains most of its catch for domestic consumption. The French-influenced state of Louisiana produces 99 per cent of the U.S.A.'s crayfish, yet 85 per cent of the crayfish catch is consumed in Louisiana. A crawfisherman commented that the crawfish provided Louisiana with a very promising industry. But Louisianans like mud bugs too much. They eat up the whole crop before people in other places can experience crawfish cuisine.

The U.S. crayfish industry was first recorded in 1888 when total production was 10 400 kg (23 000 lb), valued at \$US2400. In 1908 the Louisianan production alone was 26 300 kg (58 000 lb), and by 1950 the state's production was estimated to be 725 000 kg (1.6 million lb). Louisiana's annual average in the 1970s was 5.4—6.8 million kg (12—15 million lb), valued at approximately \$US9 million annually. The 1978 haul was 20.3 million kg (45 million lb), the 1979 catch 11.3 million kg (25 million lb).

Wisconsin, where settlers were of Scandinavian descent, had the first U.S. crayfish industry. In the 1890s Wisconsin crayfish were imported to New York where they were used to garnish fish dishes. Between 1908 and 1925 the Wisconsin industry was the U.S.A.'s largest, with 181 000 kg (400 000 lb) taken in 1925. Crayfish were used almost exclusively as free lunches in saloons. The saloons were closed by prohibition in 1926 and the crayfish industry died. Washington and Oregon have small industries but the annual catch is erratic. In good years Oregon crayfish are sent to Europe, and it is the Oregon crayfish the Swedes are reproducing in their laboratories.

The Australian experience of good and bad seasons is well understood in the U.S.A. Louisiana crayfishermen work on the assumption that there will be two bumper crops within each five-year cycle, and that

bumper crops precede mild winters and wet autumns. One of Louisiana's largest annual crops occurred in 1964—65 in the wake of hurricane Hilda, which flooded the growing areas.

To offset such seasonal fluctuations, the Americans began farming crayfish with considerable success, and are now hoping to establish a stable annual average yield. Louisiana crayfish farming began in the 1940s — accidentally, according to legend. James Avault, a leading crayfish researcher, wrote:

*"It is thought that a Louisiana rice farmer flooded his field one fall [autumn], following the rice harvest, to provide duck hunting. Next spring, the duck pond was teeming with crayfish. Duck hunters were transformed into crayfishermen and harvested the unexpected crop of crayfish."*

Today, half of Louisiana's crayfish crop is commercially farmed. There are approximately 24 300 ha (60 000 acres) of crayfish farms in Louisiana, and the average harvest is from 90—360 kg per 0.5 ha (200—800 lb per acre) with the occasional reports of 450 kg per 0.5 ha (1000 lb per acre). Although crayfish farming has increased dramatically, the method of cultivation has, according to Avault:

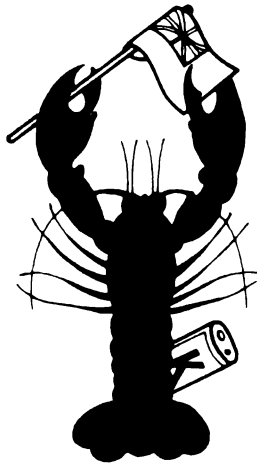
*"... changed little from its accidental beginning. Crayfish are currently being farmed in three types of ponds: rice field ponds, wooded ponds, and open ponds. In rice field ponds crayfish are rotated with the rice. Wooded areas, despite the fact that they make poor crayfish ponds, are used because the land is idle and the owners feel some production is better than none. Open ponds are constructed solely for crayfish farming."*

*"The early crop of farm-raised crayfish brings the best price. Later, when the 'wild' crop comes in, the price drops, although in 1970 the wild crop never really came in and prices reached an all-time high."*

The 1979 price for Louisiana crayfish ranged from \$US1.50 per kg (US75c per lb) at the beginning of the season, to \$US1 at the season's peak. Australian yabby prices for the same year ranged from \$A 5—3 per kg (\$A2.50—\$A1.50 per lb), while in Sweden, France and Britain the price of crayfish was £12—8 per kg (£6—4 per lb)

Crayfish farming is no new thing to Europeans. Pond polyculture of ducks, fish and crayfish was practised for hundreds of years, although it has been forgotten for most of this century. The French raised crayfish in small ponds in their gardens in 1770. By 1859 commercial French crayfish ponds had been developed, and the success of the Marquess de Selve in rearing crayfish in the channels of his castle at Villiers-sur-Essone was well publicised during the 1860s. Germans were also working on techniques for the artificial raising of crayfish.

Established European crayfish farms were wiped out by the plague but today commercial crayfish cultivation is popular in Europe, and farms are usually started with stock obtained from the Swedish laboratories. The Russians have established collective crayfish farms in the Ukraine where indigenous crayfish still abound. International crayfish symposiums, conducted by the International Association of Astacology, pay special attention to crayfish cultivation research.



## BEER CANS, BROILER CHICKENS AND AUSTRALIAN YABBY FARMS

*"After the second World War I was living in New Orleans where yabbies were sold in cans commercially and the heads stuffed. Upon my return to Australia a couple of years later, we were reptile hunting in the Murrumbidgee area of New South Wales — my husband was a reptile collector. As always, on our many trips, we hunted for yabbies — they were in the rice field channels. When I returned to Sydney I wrote to one of the farmers up there and I told him how yabbies were commercially harvested and canned in the U.S.A. I promptly had a letter back informing me that the yabbies were a pest and a menace and they needed eradicating, instead of the reverse — farming."*

Alice Robichause, North Queensland

*"A farm crop of the future is expected to be yabbies — a uniquely Australian crustacean that is already fetching good prices on local and overseas markets.*

*"[One of] Australia's leading exporters of crustacea believes the good marketing prospects will continue within the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, [the] company has rejected an interest in yabbies at this stage. The reason? Lack of supply was the main one, although cost of processing also figured . . .*

*"The company's interest in marketing yabbies will be renewed as soon as a bigger*

*yabby industry develops along the chicken farming lines. . . . Indeed, one of Australia's few experts on yabbies, [Pat McLaren, of Murray Cod Hatcheries of Australia Pty. Ltd. (based at Wagga Wagga in the Murrumbidgee area)] believes they can now be bred and reared in exactly the same way as broiler chickens."*

**National Times**

The yabby's progress is neatly encapsulated within those two statements — from pest to product. Yabby farming began in the wake of the South Australian export bust. "Ensure volume and continuity of supply" was the catch-cry, and eager-eyed yabby farmers rallied to the call. In 1974 the New South Wales Department of Agriculture had issued nine yabby farm permits and the practice spread to other states. The media quickly publicised the novelty of such seemingly eccentric ventures. "Yabby Dabby Do," yodelled the **National Times**. The news even spread to the Philippines where one newspaper announced:

*"Yabbies, a species of freshwater crayfish that abounds in Australia's water-courses, are superb from any fish farming angle.*

*"The yabby could provide some of the answers to the so-called population explosion.*

Aquaculture is one means of helping to feed the world's under-nourished people, and it is thought that the yabby would adjust well to aquaculture."

Back on the home front, South Australian farms were being described as: "New Barossa 'crop' — something to go with the wine."

"Humble yabby farmer" Ed Davis found fame in the form of a double page spread in the **Australian Women's Weekly**:

"Burly Ed Davis rammed on the towelling hat the locals at Bordertown, South Australia, say he was born with. He glowered suspiciously across his giant complex of yabbie ponds. Then he relaxed with a broad grin. 'Not a shag in sight. I reckon those flaming birds have got the message by now.'"

"Shags are bad news to a yabbie farmer operating on the scale of Ed Davis.

"The Bordertown earth-moving contractor has dived into the yabbies in a big way. He has established what he believes will ultimately be Australia's biggest yabby farm

"At the moment the yabbies are breeding. It will be two summers before Ed reaps a rich harvest from them.

"Even then it is not simply a matter of hauling up the catch.

"The yabbies have to be the size the restaurants like. This is about 85 grams [3 oz]. If they are too big they have to be trimmed with a razor. This is costly and time consuming."



Ed Davis has begun breeding yabbies in ponds that will eventually total more than 50 hectares in area.

The yabby farming stories became progressively more unusual. Tales of yabby-go-lucky farmers rearing their clawed crop in chicken sheds and beer cans became the norm. The **Australasian Post** announced:

"It's a standard Australian leg-pull to tell a foreigner you run a kangaroo farm, but when [an expatriate Scot] says he's farming 40 000 'head' of yabbies inside empty beer cans it's no send-up."

Oddly enough, it seems the wackier the yabby farming method, the more proficient the farmer.

Consider Pat McLaren. Originally a Murray cod farmer, now the doyen of the 'breed-'em-like-broiler-chickens' school of yabby farmers, McLaren was attracted to the yabby business in the early 1970s. His proudly-tendered business card attests his unusual occupation:

Pat McLaren

Aquaculture consultant

Specialist in Yabby Culture and Farming  
of Australian Native Warm Water Fish

His farm and laboratory, known as the Murray Cod Hatcheries of Australia Pty. Ltd., was the first freshwater fish farm established in Australia. The farm is situated just outside Wagga Wagga and it's a tourist attraction; the paying customers beckoned by a huge replica of a Murray cod strategically placed beside the highway. Advertising brochures spruik:

"See the Riverina's greatest city and family attraction. Winner of the prestigious Riverina Tourism Award, 1977. Winner of the Riverina Region Tourism Award, 1978.

The brochure promises aquariums full of fish (starring Big Murray — a hundred years old, 1.5 m (4 ft 6 in) long, 50 kg (114 lb) — the largest Murray cod in captivity), a variety of animals (including a Midget Bull — "a little bull goes a long way"), Murray crayfish, and of course the yabby. Lots of yabbies.

But behind the viewing aquariums, out of the public gaze, are the laboratories where the future of the yabby business is being scientifically analysed and calculated. Dotted around his lab are dried yabbies pegged to boards next to microscopes ... all the better to study them with. Along the

walls are tanks teeming with darting baby yabbies being subjected to different temperatures ... all the better to make them grow with. Pat McLaren regards his research religiously and believes he is on the threshold of a "viable yabby set-up". He says research has already established a correct yabby diet and quadrupled the yearly breeding cycle.

Considerable progress has been made in the breeding of yabbies, he claims. Where a female in the wild becomes berried only once or twice a year, research in the laboratory has been able to berry the same female up to four times a year, without detriment to her health.

The next major problems to overcome are predation and migration — preventing the yabbies eating each other, or going walkabout. These problems, Pat reckons, will be solved in a couple of years. Improved grading of yabby crops for market is another A-1 objective and Pat reckons the



Joy McLaren of the Murray Cod Hatcheries shows off a prime example of what can be achieved through indoor tank cultivation.

best way to achieve these goals is to place yabby tanks inside buildings the size of poultry sheds. Then the "virtually untapped market" will be well and truly tapped. Once this can be done yabby farming can be put on a footing similar to growing chickens indoors. It would be very viable and profitable — and perhaps this is where the future of yabby farming lies.

Pat McLaren stands firm behind the broiler-chicken-bred yabby, believing that the Australian public will "take to them with their ears back".

While Pat McLaren draws analogies between chickens and yabbies, another younger yabby farmer talks in terms of porcine peculiarities. He believes the yabby is rather like the proverbial pig in a cannery — nothing is wasted but the squeal. And the yabby doesn't even squeal.

Such crayfish wisdom is typical of the long-haired and bearded Ian Carstairs, the radical of the yabby-growing set. Pig analogies aside, Carstairs is world-famous for his method of rearing yabbies in beer cans. When you think about it, what could be more Australian? Yabbies and beer cans, mate. Which is probably why this Scotsman thought of the concept in the first place. Carstairs claims the cans provide shelter for his clawed charges:

*"One of my major breakthroughs was with beer cans. I made a deal with a manufacturer who supplied me reject bottomless cans. I was using these beer cans with a bit of artificial reef — plastic orange bag meshing — attached to them. The mesh would be made to float down from the top of the dam, with the beer cans based at the bottom. The yabbies could walk in and out of the cans, and I found these were really successful habitats. By using cans to increase the shelter in a farm dam I could increase the yield quite substantially, up to 50 per cent in fact.*

*"Another gratifying discovery was that when the females were carrying eggs or young yabbies, they really liked these beer cans. At the time they were carrying eggs, the females would be the almost exclusive occupants of the beer cans, which were just exactly the right size. Then, after the young left the mother, they would crawl up onto the orange bag mesh, and the mesh grew food in the form of algae, the ideal food for the young. The young yabbies*



*thrived on this and it also kept them away from the edge of the dams and the dangers of predators such as birds. The white faced heron, for example, walks around and around the edge of a dam eating hundreds of small yabbies. If you can attract the yabbies into the centre of the dam by providing food and shelter there, then you automatically increase yield."*

Beer cans also played a part in the sex life of Carstairs' yabbies. He once caught a pair of yabbies in the act of mating inside an empty beer can and great was the excitement on both sides of the can.

Although he's worked as a marine biologist, Carstairs doesn't hold a university degree in that discipline, and is in fact a sort of home-spun academic of astacology, wise in the ways of the wild yabby. After leaving school in Scotland, Carstairs worked as a scientific assistant on a mussel farming project, then trained as a scientific scuba diver and worked on Dublin Bay prawn research in the Orkney and Shetland Islands. In 1970 Carstairs travelled through

Asia to Australia and, after exploring the east coast, settled in Melbourne where he discovered the yabby.

He recalls that he was wandering along through Fitzroy Gardens when he came across some kids with bits of string in the water. He waited patiently to see what they were up to, and eventually the meat with the yabby clinging to it came out. He was fascinated, and literally couldn't believe it. It reminded him of his grandfather's stories of catching les écrevisses in France during the '14—18 war. Somehow, between battles, his grandfather managed to throw a few hoop nets with a bit of meat attached into the rivers and he used to tell numerous stories of catching the French freshwater crayfish.

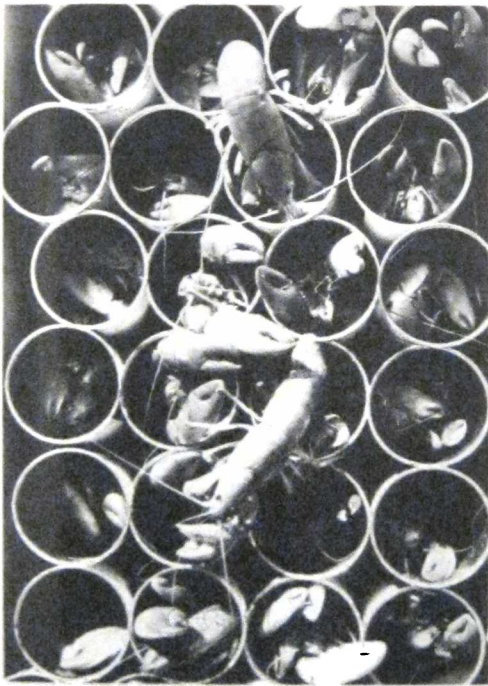
Carstairs decided to investigate a bit more about these creatures the kids were catching in ponds in the middle of the city. He found out that although yabbies were really widespread throughout Australia, nobody had ever studied them, their ecology, or how they fitted into the Australian freshwater environment. He started off by travelling very thoroughly, through Victoria, New South Wales, bits of South Australia, Canberra, and Queensland catching crayfish all the time, looking for big populations and when finding them analysing the habitat.

The thing that led him to research the aquaculture potential of yabbies was that they had a lot of advantages over other large edible crustaceans. Especially, the life cycle of their young. Most edible marine crustaceans have a complex planktonic larval juvenile stage, and farmers would need a full-scale hatchery with all the laboratory conditions to provide the right foods. This is the big advantage of the yabby — a hatchery isn't needed for it to be bred commercially.

In 1973 the Australian Fisheries bulletin reported:

*"Twenty dams were constructed on [Mr Carstairs'] uncle's property at Langley [Victoria], fenced off from stock and predatory birds. Stocking with adult and berried female yabbies began in January 1973, and by June it was estimated that there were 12 000 yabbies of all sizes in the ponds.*

*"In April samples of the yabbies were measured and tagged using a coded tail punch*



By far the most convenient and safest way to transport live yabbies is inside beer cans where they can be kept alive and in good condition.

method that lasts for 2 months. This will enable growth rates to be determined. Mr Carstairs anticipates that miniature adult yabbies will take from eighteen months to two years to grow to 13 cm [5 in] body length (measured from tail fan to rostrum point).

"He expects optimum yield after eighteen months to be 4½ tons [tonnes] of yabbies from the ponds which have a surface area of 1½ acres [0.6 ha]."

A 1977 report said:

"The summers at Langley are too short so Mr Carstairs leased 350 acres [140 ha] of lake area near Horsham in the Victorian Wimmera. This lake has all the necessary attributes. It's freshwater lake surrounded by large numbers of salt lake, and in this country there are desirable types of weeds.

"In the salt lakes there are a great number of small shrimps, *Parartemia*, which provide food for many species of water birds. The birds have to go to fresh water to drink. This brings them to Ian's lake, which is fertilised by their droppings.

"Artificial fertiliser can increase the production of yabbies and his work in this area increased production by 50 per cent at his Langley farm. However the right kind of water, such as the Horsham lake, doesn't require artificial fertilising.

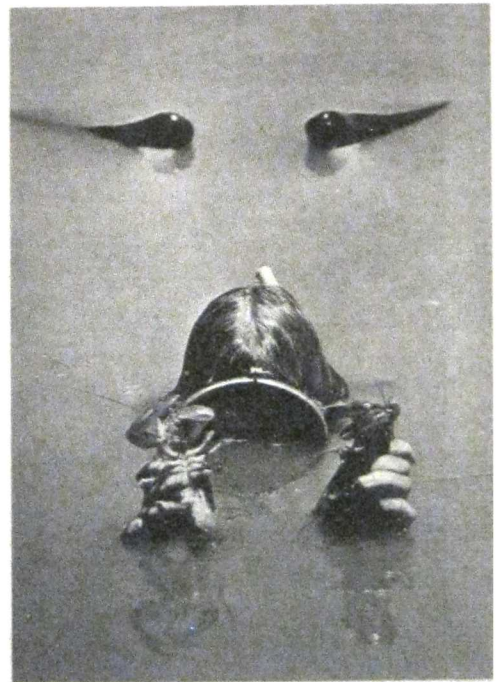
"There are few fish in the lake — an asset in this case since fish would add to the predation. Mr Carstairs thinks the water is too deficient in oxygen for the fish to do well; whereas yabbies are very tolerant to oxygen deficiency in the water. Even with that large area of water, Carstairs said, 'After five years of intensive study, I feel that the commercial viability of yabby farming is still unproven'."

Carstairs, well versed in theory, never did break through on the practical side. He did successfully rear and market yabbies, but he rarely rose above a subsistence level of income. He disagrees with many other yabby farmers in that he dismisses the intensive 'broiler-chicken' methods. Although he's been working on hatcheries, he still hasn't cracked the problem. He still thinks the most economic prospect is to use the farm dam, not the intensive method. There certainly may be a good potential for increasing the natural yabby yields from farm dams, but he still stresses that yabby farming should be

viewed as a subsidiary income. He claims the yabby's future lies in combining it with other farming operations.

Carstairs, who has 'counter-culture' persuasions, embarked on several radical crustacean crusades. He successfully applied for a commonwealth government export development grant which enabled him to travel South-East Asia to study fish-farming projects, the potential of the yabby market in those countries, and to see his theory of co-ordination between population control and food production put into practice in a scheme in the Philippines. He suggested that Aborigines be trained as yabby and fish farmers, and battled the perils of pollution. *World Fishing Magazine* reported:

"During recent surveys of Victorian waters, Mr Carstairs found that high levels of pesticides in rivers and farm enclosures were causing a severe reduction of fish stocks."



Ian Carstairs checks his yabby crop at close quarters to monitor condition, growth rate and yield.

Carstairs wrote about the 'Chemical Revolution' in the environmental magazine, **Chain Reaction**:

*"Unite!! You yabbie lovers of the world, unite and try to defend them, and Australian freshwater ecology, in their hour of need. Defend them from the 'hidden persuaders' lurking near the water-hole. The rural chemical industry, and its political allies are ready to defend the use of DDT (and the rest of their killer chemicals) with traditional economic arguments ..."*

*"Maybe you were moved by the 'Save the Whales' campaign ... we can easily identify with warm-bloodedness and loving care of offspring ... But what about the animal of your childhood dream-time? Can you try to 'SAVE THE YABBIE'?"*

*"The yabbie does not cry and gush warm blood when he is killed by insecticides — he just stops living. The whale is hunted without remorse and killed savagely; death to a yabbie is dealt out more subtly and insidiously — disguised by a clean well-packaged brightly-labelled [chemical] container."*

Carstairs dealt a valid point because European crayfish cultivators are painfully aware of the effects of pollution and the indiscriminate use of chemicals on crayfish populations. The yabby, hardy survivor that it is, is extremely susceptible to DDT and its ilk.

Carstairs also warned against the importing and exporting of live crayfish stocks, and once again he had a valid argument. Imported crayfish stocks have proved disastrous throughout the world. Apart from the already catalogued plague problems — and the ever-present danger that the yabby would succumb to the plague if American crayfish were introduced into Australia — other casualties have occurred.

Crayfish imported into Hawaii burrowed through dykes and threatened taro cultivation. Crayfish introduced to Kenya thrived and their grazing was so effective that the bottom vegetation in lakes declined, altering the lakes' ecology, and decreasing the native fish population and other animals which lived off the lakes' systems. American crayfish were introduced to Japan in 1930 as food for bullfrogs. In 1951 crayfish were present near Osaka at about 1200 kg per 0.5 ha (2600 lb per acre)

and were causing serious damage to rice crops by eating young rice shoots. Strangely, the Japanese have never thought to alleviate their imported crayfish problem by eating the little nippers.

Carstairs gave up his Australian yabby farms in 1979 and returned to Scotland to further his studies in fish management. He promptly established a hatchery to save the British crayfish species from extinction, and is currently waging a war of attrition against the plague-carrying U.S. crayfish. He is alerting the populace with pamphlets headlined:

### **From the Battle of the Ditches: Go Home U.S. Crayfish**

Alarmingly, there have been suggestions amongst would-be Australian yabby farmers that American crayfish should be imported into Australia. Not because the American crawfish is superior to the yabby, but because American crawfish research is. U.S. research is far more advanced than Australian, and data and blueprints for successful crawfish farming are readily available — Australian yabby farming methods are still to be profitably pioneered.

Luckily, the only experiment with imported crayfish stocks involving Australia has been the despatch of live marron from Western Australia to Louisiana. The experiment failed, and its American instigator, Jerome Shireman, reported in 1973:

*"Marron probably cannot exist in South Louisiana waters because of water temperature extremes. Even if established there are several factors unfavourable for commercial propagation.*

*1) Pond construction would be costly since ponds would necessarily have to be deeper than existing crayfish ponds and each pond should be enclosed so marron would not escape.*

*2) If marron are density limited (to 100 lb per acre [45 kg per 0.5 ha]), as Australian studies indicate, they are poorly suited for intensive culture purposes.*

*3) Marron are cannibalistic; therefore size classes must be separated*

*4) The [growth and reproduction] potential is low compared to native crayfish; it would take a number of years to realise returns on initial investments."*

The Western Australian government, realising the potential for local marron aquaculture, banned the export of marron stocks in 1972. The government was advised that:

*"An initial market survey has demonstrated without doubt the existence of a very large European market for freshwater crayfish."*

Marron have been fished commercially in Western Australia for some time. In 1931 a Western Australian newspaper said marron offered "profitable employment". In 1955 legislation prevented the commercialisation of marron to avoid "rapid extinction". Commercial marron farming was discussed in 1966 in what the Perth **Daily News** described as a "top secret marron plan". Parliamentary legislation gave the go-ahead to commercial marron farming in 1976, and since then several experimental farms have commenced.

In 1977 the Western Australia Department of Fisheries and Wildlife reported:

*"A keen interest has been shown by many prospective marron farmers and there will no doubt be many problems and even failures before marron farming becomes a viable and economic proposition."*

Problems and failures indeed. Problems and failures are the stock-in-trade of those far-sighted folk who, in the future, hope to trade in stocks of cultivated yabbies. There will be, they say, successful yabby farmers one day. All that's needed is a breakthrough or two and a lot of research. On the dams and on the lakes the professional yabby catchers and cultivators ply their trade. While they may dream of hanging their gold-plated one-millionth harvested yabby on their lounge-room wall, they might well be muttering this maxim:

*"There's many a slip twixt the yabby pot and the wallet."*

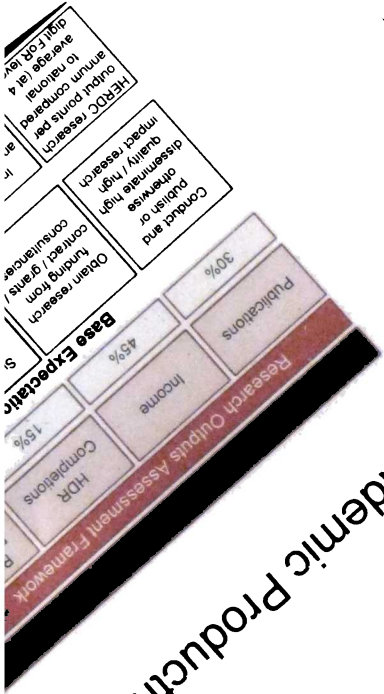
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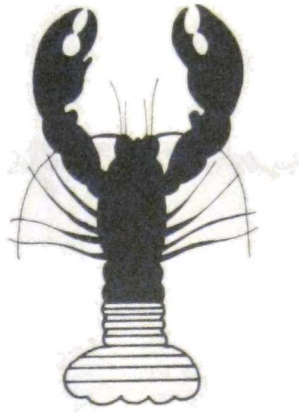
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# *The Final Word on the Yabber*

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# Academic Productivity



## SO WHY DOES A YABBY'S TAIL TURN RED . . . ?

A. F. D'Mello, a food science lecturer, reckons he's got the answer. He says:

*"The natural bright colour in most crayfish tends to darken to brown, and in advanced stages of degradation reactions even turns to shades of red and pink, a reaction similar to that which takes place with heat treatment, the conversion of the carotenoid pigments to the characteristic orange-red."*

*Simple, isn't it?*



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**Melbourne Herald** (Haddon & Trengrove:  
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**New Idea**, Sydney, N.S.W. (cartoon p. 103)

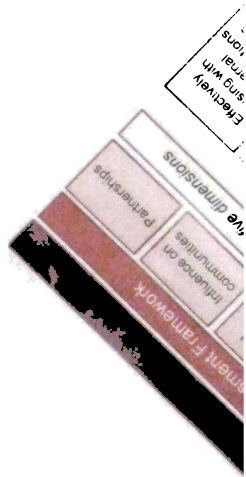
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Despite its value as a food source and its place in an important ecological cycle, the Australian freshwater crayfish has been much maligned by English colonists during their brief period of settlement in the Great South Land. In fact it has only been in recent years that the true worth of the yabby has been realised. In this book, Peter Olszewski examines the myths and legends, the facts and fantasies that have been generated by, and about, the humble yabby.

Peter Olszewski was born in Bomlitz, West Germany, in 1948 and migrated to Australia three years later to settle in Maryborough, in central Victoria. After leaving school he began writing advertising copy and public relations material in Melbourne. This led to a long association with the alternative press including such venerable publications as the *Sunday Observer*, *Go-Set*, *Rats*, *Living Daylights*, *Nation Review*, *Loose Licks*, *Ram* and *Australasian Weed*. More recently Olszewski wrote **A Dozen Dopey Yarns From The Pot Prohibition** and became a travelling contributor for the Qantas magazine, *Detours*. He is still working as a freelance journalist in Australia but has a passion for making regular visits to America to maintain his contacts amongst the Louisiana crawdad.

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